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# [RETRACTION] REFLECTIONS ON LUKÁCS' REALIST VIEW OF LITERATURE FROM A LITERARY-CRITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ZHANG, Hui Reflections on Lukács' realist view of literature from a literary-critical and philosophical perspective. *Transformação: Unesp journal of philosophy*, Marília, v. 47, n. 1, e0240004, 2024.

**Abstract:** In the age of scientism, it is not a surprise to revisit Lukács' realist view of literature. Although some scholars have criticized his holism view, his realist view of literature is exactly what the times need, in terms of its concern for the reality of human life and its criticism of social reality. This general view is useful in realizing the realistic effect of literary criticism based on the criticism of an irrational general view. However, people overlook this point when criticizing his general and ideological view. His "realism" is not the same as the "imitation" of classical realism, nor is it the same as the "reproduction" of critical realism. The creation of art, including literature, is not just a simple adherence to social reality, but a reflection of the overall historical social reality through archetypes.


**Keywords:** Literary criticism. Realism. Theory of reflection. Holism. Typicality.

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**Resumen:** En la era del cientificismo, no es sorprendente revivir la visión realista de Lukács de la literatura. Aunque algunos estudiosos han criticado su visión holística, a juzgar por la preocupación por la realidad de la vida humana y la crítica de la realidad social, su visión realista de la literatura es exactamente lo que los tiempos necesitan. En el contexto del postmodernismo, cuando se critica su visión universal e ideológica del pueblo, se ignora la utilidad de esta visión universal para lograr los efectos realistas de la crítica literaria basada en la visión universal irracional. Su "realismo" no es lo mismo que la "imitación" del realismo clásico, ni la "reproducción" del realismo crítico. La creación artística, incluida la literatura, no es solo una simple adhesión a la realidad social, sino un reflejo de la realidad social histórica general a través de prototipos.

**Palabras clave:** Crítica literaria. Realismo. Teoría de la reflexión. Holismo. Tipicidad.

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# RETRACTION] REFLECTIONS ON LUKÁCS' REALIST VIEW OF LITERATURE FROM A LITERARY-CRITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

Lukács was an important Marxist theorist in the twentieth century, and his realist theory was once treated with indifference after a particular historical encounter. But in this century, especially after the global economic crisis in 2008, his realist theory has been re-examined by the academic community, and people are surprised that his realism is still functional today (Lukacs, 2010, p. 89). When pluralism, which emphasizes the independence of the subject, proliferates to the point that the unity of the subject at the bottom is dissolved, his realist ideas with a spirit of resistance come back into the field of scholarship. How to understand and view it has become a realistic and urgent issue. His realism, or realist view of literature, is rooted in the human beings' reality. He believes that reification is a structural problem of capitalist society, permeating every corner of social reality. Therefore, criticism in the field of literature alone is useless, which cannot produce a real critical effect and touch the social reality of capitalism. Any pluralist critique of capitalism, such as naturalist and modernist literature, is powerless in the context of capitalism itself, which is constructed on the premise of "respect" for pluralism. They bring to light the plurality of human reality, while at the same time deeply recognizing the existence of reification in the society, but still failing to confront the reality of human reification in capitalist society itself. Lukács, therefore, points out that the critique of literature should also be a critique of the social reality under the capitalist system.

## 1 RETURNING TO THE REALISTIC LITERARY VIEW

The basis of Lukács' realist theory is the reflection theory. Unlike classical reflection theory, which is always under a mechanical and abstract perspective, his reflection theory believes that literature's reflection of reality should be historical and concrete. He believed that the reflection of the objective world by art, including literature, cannot be separated from the human beings' daily life because the human beings' real life makes up the entire

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social reality. Moreover, the objective reality reflected by art is not absolute, but historical, changing and dialectically evolving.

He demonstrated the objective reality of art through the investigation of early witchcraft. He believed that art sprouted from the “fixed” reflection of things in witchcraft rituals (such as sacrificial dances) (Lukacs, 1986, p. 69). If witchcraft is investigated under the feudal monarchy environment, people will find that witchcraft inspired people at that time to explore a broader and free spiritual world, which provided the soil for the birth of art. As Fraser said, it is “[...] the son of error and the mother of freedom and truth” (Jayne, 1998, p. 74). Many positivists always look at the past with a present-day view and hold a mechanical view of aesthetics, without recognizing the role witchcraft played at the time. Early witchcraft was born out of the emergence of human emotional and rational consciousness, but it remained united with social reality for its entanglement with human daily practice. However, because witchcraft was a visual reflection of the backward society with mystical myths at that time, it had a distinct idealism character (Lukacs, 1971, p. 99).

On the other hand, naturalism and existentialism argue that the literary arts of the past are not realistic, which contradicts the existence of those great works of ancient Greece and the Renaissance. Although Marx also believed that those works were deeply marked by past historical periods and could not be reproduced in a time of greater social differentiation. But whether bringing people artistic pleasure or providing a normative and unattainable model can be a criterion for judging whether a work of art has historical value. On this issue, Lukács argues that Marx here achieved a divergence from the mechanical materialist view of aesthetics. The latter simply categorizes all art as a reflection of objective reality, but the former builds on this by recognizing the specific socio-historical nature reflected by art (Lowy, 1979, p. 65). In the copying of the same objective fact, art differs from other fields in that the objective fact it copies is not mechanically present as in the old materialism defined. But neither is it an absolute spiritual unfolding of reality, as Hegel said, but an objective reality in flux, developing in a certain direction. It is historical in its own right, and the historical norms of the content and expression of the various facsimiles only “approach” the historicity of objective reality to a certain extent (Lukacs, 1986, p. 57). The forms and categories of historicity are in a state of flux, and their contents are changing. The change of content acts on the form, causing a certain degree of change in the categories, i.e. the creation of new categories and the elimination of old ones.

It is thus clear that the relationship between objective reality and art is dialectical and not mechanically invariant. Lukács considers art at the center of Marxist aesthetics as more than a simple reproduction of the apparent intuitive perception of the material world. The grasp of this relationship is what distinguishes Marxism from the various aesthetic theories that preceded it. Previous objectivist and subjectivist aesthetics also saw artistic reflection as

having uniqueness, but in their case, this uniqueness was in opposition or unity with the objective reality, and the understanding of human existence was transhistorical. Although they recognized that history develops, this development is external. It is the realization in the material world of what has been determined by inner consciousness and ideas. The development of art is only a superficial and external development, in which nothing new essentially arises.

After theoretically clarifying the relationship between art and objective reality, someone may question whether the relationship between art and objective reality, which is now clear in earlier periods, such as the age of witchcraft, also exists in modern society. Schiller argues that modern life is fragmented and that the people's ends and means, the workers' labor and their reward, are disconnected. Art cannot simply copy and reflect everyday life as it did in the ancient Greek period, but rather denies or criticizes it, which leads to the dissolution of the reflective relationship between art and objective reality. Lukács responds to this challenge in this way: this view ignores the role of modern practical activity for modern art. Art is not in opposition to modern everyday life, but remains in a relationship of reflection and being reflected. Even works that are purely imitations of nature and works that simply express subjective feelings cannot be separated from the reality of life and have a realistic element. He thinks that Schiller's mistake lies in contrasting art with modern people's daily life and ignoring the fundamental role of modern people's daily life in modern art. The modern people's daily life is not in stark opposition to art as Schiller thought. In fact, the relationship between the two still maintains the relationship of source and flow.

The source of this questioning is the awareness that the sense of fragmentation brought about by the modern system of division of labor has diluted the sense of unity and wholeness of social life. The empirical world seems so trivial and refractory compared to neatness of perception and systemic rigidity. Due to many social conditions, such as religion and tradition, it is difficult for people to see through the fog the real appearance of daily life. But writers with realism and humanism, such as Shakespeare and Balzac, confronted the complexity of daily life and linked it to the changes in history. They sought to provide a picture of life in which the two sides of the form and social reality, the universal and the particular, and the contradictory, left a visual impression of "convergence" in their works, bringing a sense of "inseparable wholeness" (George, 2000, p. 57). Therefore, to reflect the real world authentically, modern art has to copy daily life and unite it with socio-historical reality in a dialectical way.

## **2 HOLISM AND TYPICALISM AS THE MAIN IDEA OF THOUGHT**

Lukács' theory of reflection is closely linked to the holism theory. He believes that the effect of literary criticism on social reality is to criticize social reality from the perspective

of the organic totality, that is, from the perspective of the organic connection between human daily life and capitalism, and to imitate reality. This process is essential for the creation of typical characters.

His holism theory undergoes a shift from the early cultural holism view to the later social holism one. The cultural holism view argues that the quantitative analysis of modern science has alienated modern life, causing the originally ordered life to become disordered and fragmented, and that people can no longer have the totality that they had in earlier times. Only culture or art retains the ability to grasp totality through the negation of life. Negation here refers to the reshaping of everyday life, reuniting the multiple and fragmented every day into organic totality. But later, influenced by Hegel, Lukács soon recognized the dialectical unity of art and human life. As he explains in his "The Theory of the Novel" about the relationship between the novel and the times. Novels, like other literary forms, arise from a critique of the phenomenon of reification, but unlike other literature, it does not believe that reification dissolves the intrinsic meaning of everyday life, but rather that everyday life contains the dynamics of intrinsic historical development. Thus, modern art should not deny the fragmented social reality, but rather affirm its intrinsic historical dynamics by embracing the people's everyday life.

After the Marxist turn, Lukács realized the immaturity of this conception of culture, which talks ideologically about art totality, seeks a Hegelian connection between art and history and ignores the connection with objective and concrete socio-historical factors. When evaluating "War and Peace", he said that it displayed the socio-historical roots of family tragedy and offered a possible ideal state of life. He realized that the phenomenon of reification is a product of specific socio-historical conditions, namely the capitalist system. The phenomenon of reification does not only appear in the sphere of production but also spreads to people's daily life, the spiritual world, and their emotional perceptions. Therefore, any literary criticism under the capitalist system is not true criticism and cannot escape from the individuals' subjective limitations. To achieve a critique of everyday life, modern literature must break the limits of form and dialectically unite the critique of everyday life and capitalist society with the art of holism. The art of holism is social, concrete and temporal in connotation, free from abstraction, and always connected to concrete social facts. Art unfolds itself in the vivid shaping of changing reality. In the process, literary art sees the movement of life as dialectically unified and shapes art through typical characters.

His view of the typical character is based on Marx's view of the typical and is a concrete development of his holism theory. As Balzac said, typically refers to a sample of the class. The typical character contains the most distinctive traits of people with whom it has a high degree of similarity. The typical character theory is related to the movement of modern society and the rise of humanism. The literary concern with the character's personality was derived from

the increasingly intense conflict between the independent individuals' autonomous rights and the general relations of society in modern society. He argues that the type is not only a character's subjective characteristic but also a product of society. Because the character's special personality is fully revealed in the social struggle, and the people's struggle in society is eternal and "[...] the basis for the existence and development of human personality" (Lukacs, 1980, p. 177). The typical is typical because it thoroughly displays the characteristics that represent the people's development and the one of times in extreme environments. But his view of the typical is not simply about holism, for he says in "Critical Realism in Socialist Society" that, precisely because the typical is the outworking of the extreme possibilities of the potential of the times, it is impossible to single out the individual from the whole (Lukacs, 1981, p. 142). He can distinguish the different characters' spirituality in the same period and class and point out the characters' different spirituality in different periods when dissecting the typical ones in his works. As he did with Nechlyudov in *Resurrection* and Levin in *Anna*. The reason why different characters in different literary works have such different character profiles is that the social environments they live in are so different that it is difficult to find a common character trait in them. But they also faithfully reflect specific social facts. His view of typicality has always focused on the level of specificity and explored the characters' details, rather than taking some a priori rules as a guideline to examine the characters. He affirmed the characters' individuality and looked for the attributes of holism in individuality, which is the "unity of the individual" that emerges from life (Lukacs, 2015, p. 760). It can be said that his holism theory and typical view are closely connected in the individual and internalized in the individual's words and actions.

### 3 RETHINKING LUKÁCS' VIEW OF REALIST LITERATURE

Lukács' theory of reflection differs from the classical theory of reflection in that it is historically specific. He believed that the reflection of objective reality by any kind of art, including literature, is not conceptualized and mechanized, but is based on the dialectical unity of subject and object, universal and particular, means and end. Adorno believes that Lukács does not get rid of the tradition of literary reflection theory, but still regards literary form as a reflection of Du Hui's reality. He believes that Lukács' art view is a direct photographic depiction of reality, which denies the uniqueness of literature.

But that assessment is biased. This is because he never asked writers to reflect reality in such a way, as can be seen from his criticism of naturalistic literature, which he criticized not because of its objectivity but because of its subjectivity. He argues that to see naturalism as a photographic reproduction of objects is a distortion of naturalism since its portrayal of reality is also a reproduction based on selective processing and deconstruction. In doing so, he expresses the idea that art is not equivalent to objective reality, nor should it be considered

as another “reality” in the world of ideas. The process of artistic investigation is “uniform” and “self-contained”. It does not reflect all the details of the facts of life, but the complete process of real life. As the best art form reflecting social reality, the novel, because of its own “semi-autonomy” in structure, can interact with the human beings’ changing concrete daily life, presenting them with an ideal form of possible life. His demand for literary art to reflect reality comes from the neo-Kantian theory, which recognizes the unknowability of reality and assumes that literature can only reflect reality within the limits of man’s perception. But the form of such reflection is not purely rational in Kant and Schiller’s sense, but “irrational” perception, which is fragmentary, intuitive, and empirical, and can precisely fit with the fragmentation of reality itself.

Lukács’ theory of reflection, as interpreted by Merleau-Ponty, is that works of art are not stereotypical responses to the reality of society and history. Art itself has inherent laws through which it represents society and history. What he calls socio-history is always closely connected to the everyday reality of human life, which is immanent to the subject and expressed through the individual as the subject. Subjectivity is an element incorporated into history, rather than given and determined by it. History is a universalization of subjectivity, a conglomeration of human relations, not an existence under the physical laws of the material world, but a “totality to be understood” (Merleau-Ponty, 2009, p. 74-75).

His understanding of socio-history is vividly concrete and profoundly illuminates the reality of human life. This literary art vividly maps reality guided by its internal logic. Lukács reconstructs the classical theory of reflection and intends to provide a way of understanding the problem for people in modern times. But this approach still seems to have a residual utopian fantasy of the holistic culture of the ancient Greek period. He believes that people in ancient Greece “[...] only knew how to answer but did not know how to ask questions” (Lukacs, 2012, p. 21), “[...] and that people, in that period, had self-knowledge, followed the motto ‘know thyself’, knew how to reflect and introspect, and had the habit and ability to reflect” (Lukacs, 2012, p. 21). In modern society, however, because of the development of science and the spread of education, people have a far greater knowledge base than those ones of the past, but they do not have the habit of reflection and self-reflection. In a commodity-centered and atomized society, people are engaged in fierce competition for things, and conquering nature and mastering others have become instinctive behaviors. In this way, the mysterious unknowability of the natural world is not respected and recognized, and the human beings’ complexity and plurality are hidden in cognition and not valued. This modern humans’ lack of intellectual “awareness” seems to be the reason for the failure of those modernist literary imitations of reality. However, Lukács’ utopian fantasies of ancient Greek society are mostly derived from incomplete narratives of the society under the historical period, such as Homer’s epics, and even the authenticity of their narratives cannot be guaranteed. So this judgment of earlier times may also be wrong. His reflection theory contains a sort of utopian fantasy of



a return to an ordered and holistic society and a social culture like that of the ancient Greek period (Lowy, 1979, p. 78).

But what is reality, and how can we judge whether the reality reflected in literature is real? Lukács argued that the “irrational” reality expressed in naturalistic and modernist literature did not truly reflect the human beings’ daily life. However, capitalist reality had a “rational” part in addition to the irrational part, i.e., the “irrational” part was incorporated into its system through alienation. His view of reality can also be seen in his philosophy of history. In his critique of Kant’s dualism, he proposed that the problem of reality should be solved from the totality of reality, not avoiding the reality towards the inner nature as Kant did, and not limiting it to the field of art as Schiller did. But starting from the subject in the historical totality, making each present historical direction a new starting point for understanding reality (Engelbrecht, 2018, p. 57). Lukács believed that Kant, on the premise of realizing the unknowability of “thing in itself”, tried to resort to the unknowable concept of “thing in itself” to solve various problems of binary opposition in philosophy. In this way, Kant not only simplified the problems of binary opposition within the scope of human history, but also eliminated the concept of the thing in itself. But even after mastering the right way of understanding problems, it is difficult to make correct judgments when confronted with the complexity of human social reality. There were early misjudgments he made about history, for example, his views on the problem of the development of socialism - how to achieve de facto victory in a country.

#### **4 PEOPLEHOOD AND ABSTRACTION OF THE REALIST VIEW OF LITERATURE**

Lukács believed that if a literary work did not relate to the people’s concrete life, it would end up as one of the unimportant works in history. His criticism of the naturalistic and modernistic view of literature stemmed in part from his dissatisfaction with their lack of peoplehood. His realist view of literature had the peoplehood, as could be seen from his reflective and general theories of the people’s concrete lives. The realistic and concrete human life and the masses of people are the final points of his literary theory. For him, even if a work is of high artistic attainment, it is still a failure if it cannot relate to the people’s daily life. This assertion is related to his thinking about the modern situation of literature and the people’s role in modern history. He believed that the mere art form has drifted and dissipated in modern society because it is a socio-historical reflection of the masses, so if a work were without the people, there would be no readership, no nationality and no value in the mind of the masses. But this idea of using the existence of peoplehood as a criterion to conclude whether the work is good is hasty and crude. Many scholars have criticized his concept of people as containing a class position. However, it is arbitrary to judge his idea of peoplehood as classism, because the conclusion Lukács made in “History and Class Consciousness” about the new historical

literature is progressive. While this literature certainly focused on the proletariat at large, most of its protagonists came from the aristocratic class of society. The concept of the people in his philosophy is specific. In evaluating Gustav's and others' historical novels, he suggested that the people's portrayal in those works was mostly abstract and that the people appeared in the works only as an object, not as the real subject of history. He criticizes their practice of making the heroic figure the protagonist of the novel and condensing the history of an era into a single hero as abstract, a characterization that loses the unity between the characters' fate and the direction of the times.

Since then, discussions on people's character in literature have been enduring. But most of those discussions tend to move toward a narrow, generalized, and vague understanding of its meaning (Ma, 2013, p. 41). Today's discourse on this topic is mostly confined to the framework of the past, drawing on such discourses as Becherdu's view of the people and the existentialist view of humanity, but rarely discussing it in the context of the current historical situation. Some scholars have addressed this topic from a "post-revolutionary" perspective or in a "post-peoplehood" context. In a way, however, such an exposition has the effect of delegitimizing the existence of the concept of "peoplehood. In some postmodernist theories, contemporary literature does not have a pure "peoplehood" connotation, but this does not mean that the legitimacy of the concept of "peoplehood" is completely extinguished. To evaluate and respond to the emergence of underclass literature and individualized "pure literature," today's literature needs to talk about "peoplehood" again, and it should see the plurality of people's real-life nowadays. Although the differences in the selection of material between underclass literature and pure literature are visible, the relationship between these two is not opposed, and their formal defects are similar. This similarity is reflected in how the two deal with the relationship between the individual and the real world. Just as he criticizes naturalist and modernist literature for often falling into a "contingent, schematic, abstract, and linear" situation, so too does much of today's "underclass literature" often falls into a "contingent" situation in dealing with the relationship between the individual and the real world. The "accidental" situation prevents them from getting out of the trap of private and individualistic writing (Lukacs, 1980, p. 218). The underlying people are always presented as schematized and divided individuals. In this situation, a return to his literary outlook with a people's perspective is what the literary world needs. For if the idea of peoplehood in literature originated and flourished in Russia in the 19th century and the Soviet period, then his idea of peoplehood merged and developed to maturity the modern ideas of peoplehood in such literature as Becherdu, Soviet literature and European 20th-century modernism (Szpojankowski, 2019, p. 228).

However, a return to his literary outlook needs to be accompanied by vigilance against certain tendencies of abstraction. His critiques of classical realist, naturalist and modernist literature are based on a linear understanding of the development of modern

Western literature. In his view, the peak of the development of modern Western literature was in the first half of the 19th century, and since then, that is, from naturalistic literature onwards, the path of decline. The trajectory of this development, according to him, implies the developmental vein of capitalism. The dynamic development of literary forms a one-to-one correspondence with the various stages of capitalism. For example, classical realist literature corresponds to the stage of capitalist craftsmanship, naturalist literature to the stage of liberal capitalism, and modernist literature to the stage of monopoly capitalism. Many scholars agree with this approach to the history of modern Western literature because their understanding of the history of Western literature also largely follows this historical lineage. From a certain point of view, this linear understanding of literary history is unquestionable, but in the context of the history of world literary development, this inertial understanding of literary history with a Western-centric flavor does not make sense. For example, in the history of modern Chinese literature, it is difficult to say which literary trend guided the Chinese literary scene during the May Fourth Movement, because it was a confluence of various literary trends, such as realism, romanticism, naturalism and modernism, and the characteristics of the times behind it cannot be correlated with modern Western literature as well. Here, his concept of literary history cannot cope with and explain such a complex literary development. It is evident that this approach is not universal and has a certain Western-centric and overall abstract tendency.

## CONCLUSION

The core idea is that literary criticism must be directed to the specific overall socio-historical reality. Then it can achieve a practical effect and show the alienation of human life and the spiritual world by the structural materialization of capitalism in the form of literature itself. In this process, literature needs to maintain its self-regulation in terms of its content and form. Lukács' realism is rooted in the theory of reflection. It observes the human beings' real life concealed by reification through the typical characters permeated with the characteristics of the times from the organic totality (socio-historical) perspective. Unlike Hegel's holism view imposed on literature, this organic view of holism can be felt naturally and intuitively by the reader through the concrete form of the works. It always focuses on the individual particularity and concrete life in the socio-historical context. The connotation of peoplehood in Lukács' thought can be found. He believes that the fate of the individual and the times are closely connected, the personality of the typical character manifests the extreme possibilities of the times, and the character comes to his fate in the organic totality of social history. At the same time, in the reproduction of his literary view, what cannot be ignored is to make a concrete investigation combined with the changing social history and current

literary situation. It is conducive to avoiding the fall into the fallacy of linear understanding of the development of literature.

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