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## The Rise, the Fall, and the Resurgence of Theory: Critique of Suspicion, Critique Beyond Suspicion

**Abstract.** The article stands for a critical argument for the present themed issue of *Ekphrasis*, devoted to *Aftermaths of Critical Theory in Cinema, Literature, Art and Visual Culture*. This short introduction briefly presents the interpretive perspective of each of the articles, pointing out that their area of inquiry is relevant for a politics of aesthetics and for the dialogue between modes of doing critique and ways of art-making, therefore avoiding any theoretical parochialism.

**Keywords:** political turn in arts and humanities, critical theory, post-critical, school of suspicion, the Eastern scene.

Critical theory has remained one of, if not the most relevant branch of theory endorsed in the intellectual landscape of the humanities and the social sciences in recent decades. Its roots coincided with the advent of social critical theory in the works of the members of the Frankfurt School and it subsequently intersected, influenced or even dominated most of the areas of theory in the last part of the 20th century. French Theory, combined with the resurgence of a Marxist line of thought in the decades following World War II, has become the matrix for prevalent modes of interpretation in visual studies, literary studies and performance studies alike, mainly through the critique of representation and of the subject. The last decade has brought along a revival of critical theory, whether this is linked with a politics of aesthetics (to name only authors such as Jacques Rancière, Boris Groys), or with

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the entanglement of aesthetics with ideology. Other authors (such as Robert Doran, in his recent book from 2017, *The Ethics of Theory: Philosophy, History, Literature*) analyse the ethical turn within cultural studies, while others claim an ecological readjustment of aesthetic anthropology (Bruno Latour). Yet, the reappraisal of critical theory brings along primarily a *political turn* within art criticism, literary and cultural studies (in the vein of Edward Said's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical inheritance).

The difference that current critical theory maintains from its 20th century forms can also be found in alternative approaches – as in the case of Latour – to what has been called “critique”, such as the actor-network theory and the “compositionist” method. In keeping with Latour's suggestions, philosopher Graham Harman argues for an object-oriented criticism. Another perspective is developed by the literary historian Rita Felski, who takes a polemical stance against the “school of suspicion” and engages in a “curatorial”, restorative method of literary and aesthetic interpretation. Different scholars propound the development of new interpretive concepts inspired by the particularities of the analyzed texts, rather than of concepts derived from a pre-existing critical-ideological apparatus. Thus, a post-critical turn has also been hailed in the aftermath of critical theory, as a “descriptive turn” (proposed by the literary theorist Heather Love), as another hermeneutics of recollection (following the one advocated by Paul Ricoeur, who opposes it to the hermeneutics of suspicion), as a mode of “reading with the grain” (propounded by Timothy Bewes, in a contestatory approach to the critique that goes against the grain), or as a kind of “reparative reading” (derived from the work of Melanie Klein and promoted by Eve Sedgwick).

Therefore, the present issue, 1/2018, of *Ekphrasis* proposes a dialogue about the state of Grand Theory nowadays and invites reflection on the relevance of new critical readings in the field of cinema and visual studies, literary studies, and performance studies. The articles deal with either explicit polemic or implicit ways in which critical theory has influenced the domain of aesthetics and art theory, and has also pervaded different modes of art-making. Section 1 (*Conflated Ideologies and Aesthetic Theories*) comprises articles that debate extensively the theoretical and methodological “wars” within present-day lines of interpretation based on critical theory and its aftermath, with a special attention to their consequences in cinema studies, art and visual studies, literary studies, and cultural theory. Horea Poenar, in his *Echoes, Specters and the Work of Critical Theory*, argues for the revival of the emancipatory stance of critical theory, and for the revitalization of a politically-conscious discourse of art, against the vogue of “post-critical thought or even the becoming-institution of post-theory.” His plea to reconsider the “politicization of aesthetics”, as advocated by Walter Benjamin, invokes arguments taken from celebrated contemporary critical theorists, such as Judith Butler, Hal Foster and, last but not least, Slavoj Žižek, the latter with his *Revolution at the Gates*. A pertinent statement of Poenar's article reads as follows: “The key to critical theory after all has always been that the revolution is always radically unfinished. And in such a point it meets art in its profoundest essence.”

Entitled *The Emancipated Theorist: Indisciplinarity and the Academia*, Carlo Comanducci's article focuses on the "anti-disciplinary implications" of Jacques Rancière's thesis on the spectator's emancipation, and proposes an interdisciplinary approach on both the community of the academia and its "emancipated" theorist. Doru Pop's article, *On the Dialectical Value of the Science of Mickey Mouse, or the Return of the Negation of the Negation in Cinema Studies*, is an accurately polemical and innovative study that discusses the "methodological validity" of social and political critique and of dialectical criticism. Using the lenses of film studies, Doru Pop analyses not only some of the "bloodless wars of film critics", but also forges the concept of *fluid dialectics*, rooted in his critical practice of interpreting recent cinematic productions. Alexandru Matei, in his *Roland Barthes and the Reception of French Structuralism in Socialist Romania*, sets forth a series of hypotheses regarding the ambivalent effects of French structuralism on the Romanian intellectuals living under the socialist regime. Starting from several key questions – "What purpose did structuralism serve for the Eastern European literature of the socialist era? Was it the effect of a literary fashion trend, as trends spread from the center outwards, meanwhile reinventing themselves anew in the center?" –, he develops a nuanced critical argumentation that arrives at a paradoxical yet plausible conclusion about the position of "the structural man", as understood by Barthes, in the Eastern scene, under the socialist regime and in the post-communist context.

Section 2 (*Critique and Artistic Practices*) groups articles focused on diverse artistic practices and curatorial discourses, seen from interpretive angles imbedded in the body of critical theory. Ana Tecar analyses the practice of artists such as Marina Abramović, Marlyn Arsem or Tehching Hsieh and dwells on the paradoxes of a "fetishization" of the present/presence in long-duration performances, combining the critical arguments of, among others, Derrida, Deleuze, Hal Foster and Bruno Latour. Taking under scrutiny new artistic expressions of the digital age, Rodica Mocan draws on Andrew Feenberg's critical theory approach to technology and argues for its relevance for interpreting transhumanist art. Alexandra Turcu invokes Hannah Arendt's political philosophy and resorts to Ariella Azoulay's theory of photography, in order to reassess the state of the photography of private space. She exposes the ideology of the photographic act by focusing on Dani Lessnau's experiment and maintains the ethical scope of transgressing the private sphere into the public space.

In Section 3 (*Performing Non-normative Discourses*), Iulia Cărdan's article is a critical inquiry on the ideological constructs of gender and identity, following the perspective of Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, and critically analyzing films directed by Rainer Fassbinder and by Jaou Pedro Rodrigues. Dragoș Bucur explores the "topo-nomological principle" (as theorised by Derrida), by articulating a complex anthropological and critical research on the Judeo-Christian discourse, exposing its normative impositions on the cultural and religious Other. Adriana Teodorescu

demonstrates that Kundera's novel, *Immortality*, underlies an important critical potential, able to deconstruct some of the essentialist ontological dimensions and ideological biases of Western culture towards the idea of immortality.

Finally, the section 4, dedicated to book reviews, is a necessary presentation of some of the young authors whose books participate in the debates around the state of theory in the Eastern-European intellectual scene, and especially in the Romanian academic milieu. The section comprises Nicoleta Sălcudean's review of Anna Batori, *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema* (2018), Sanda Cordoș's review of Adriana Stan, *Bastionul lingvistic. O istorie comparată a structuralismului în România (The Linguistic Bastion. A Comparative History of Structuralism in Romania, 2017)*, and Cosmin Borza's review of Teodora Dumitru, *Rețeaua modernităților: Paul de Man – Matei Călinescu – Antoine Compagnon (The Web of Modernities: Paul de Man – Matei Călinescu – Antoine Compagnon, 2016)*.

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