

LARSEN: 'LATINAMERICANISM WITHIN THE MARXIST TRADITION OF LITERARY AESTHETICS'*

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Resumen: This interview is about Professor Neil Larsen's biography, since his formative years, focussed in his years in the University of Minnesota, during the Reagan's administration. It presents a critical analysis of the changes in the American intellectual context during the 80's, and emphasizes the impoverishment and 'domestication' of intellectual life in the United States. On the contrary, Larsen defends the engagement with Lukacs, as necessary to preserve the tradition of the Marxist literary aesthetics.

Palabras Clave: latinamericanism, literature, Lucaks, marxist tradition, Neil Larsen.

1. ABOUT CHANGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE SINCE THE 1980S

Fernando Gómez¹: What polite things could we say about the changes and transformations in the intellectual climate in North America since the 1980s?

Neil Larsen²: Enormous changes, and the obvious ones have to do with changes in the world, [such as] the whole Reagan counter-revolution, which I remember vividly. I think it was in 1982 when Reagan was elected, [and I would now see myself] standing outside Folwell Hall, at the University of Minnesota with some friends wondering whether we had to leave the country. It was a little bit dramatic, but the morning after we decided to be sure our passports were in order. This was followed obviously by the events in Central America in the 1980s and [the] so-called end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, [which] especially for a Marxist both intellectually and militantly [had a tremendous impact]. I don't

know if these things are very polite, but I think I experienced the 1980s as a time, as any Marxist or anyone involved with Left-wing causes would have, a time of immense bitter disappointments and generally speaking counter-revolutionary current that will last to this day. It became increasingly difficult to become an activist on the Left in campuses simply because one was always sort of fighting what seemed to be losing battles. When I got to Minnesota in the late 1970s, the energies of the 1960s were still lingering on in some sense. There was a mood of student activism still present and this was apparent in the whole movement against apartheid, the large campaign among universities to divest their stockholdings to South-African companies. I don't think it reached the scale of the anti-war movement, but it was large. But the 1980s were progressively a decline in activism. At first, there was a whole of hostility towards the Left and the so-called collapse of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the Soviet Union, this strenuous effort on the part of official anti-Communist organs and institutions in the US to declare Marxism a non-entity. It was not interesting anymore. It was dead. In the most restrictive intellectual prism or mores, strictly in the intellectual or more academic setting, this was essentially the ascendancy of the French post-structuralist-influenced theory in literature departments, which has begun earlier in the early 1970s. It really came into its own. I was in graduate school in Minnesota when theory with a capital "T" sort of made its grand entrance. It did so in my case in the guise of Wład Godzich, who is now actually in the Humanities in the University of California, Santa Cruz. He was my dissertation advisor, the director of Comparative Literature, who came one year after I arrived. He brought with him the whole legacy of French and Eastern European linguistic philosophy, structuralism and post-

structuralism. He had been at Yale University a close disciple of Paul De Man and he brought with him all of this. The fact that all of this occurred at Minnesota where Marxism was pretty much on the table made it all both more pleasant and interesting, [but also] more confusing and ambiguous. What I have seen taking place in the late 1980s and 1990s is a kind of a retreat. And this is a subject of hours of discussion. It has been a period of, on one level, a degradation of intellectual, political standards of thinking. And yet at the same time things have opened up. So it is hard to characterize it or evaluate it unequivocally.

2. ABOUT THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF INTELLECTUAL LIFE IN THE HOME OF THE BRAVE, AND THE THIN POSSIBILITY OF AN ACADEMIC REFUGE

FG: Sometimes I can't help but feel that we are all inhabiting a tremendously impoverished and domesticated cultural life. And the rub is that there are many good reasons, institutional, political, etc., for keeping it precisely that way. With the US mostly in mind, do you agree with this [perhaps gloomy] vision of things?

NL: Yes, I do see it that way. I think in my own case personally the only way I have been able to keep my head above water, or feel that I keep my head above water, is increasing by turning to academic, intellectual and pedagogical pursuits almost exclusively. When I came to California, this corresponded with a phase of burned-out having spent twenty years as an activist trying to organize left-wing causes on campuses, both as a graduate student and as a young assistant and associate professor. That was an overall a grueling and disappointing experience. I am not sorry I did it, but it essentially drove home in a very direct and blunt way something of the things you have mentioned, the attempt so to speak, literally and figuratively, go out and speak out against the system in street corners, is not working. It is a very disheartening experience. The best you can do is sort of being tolerated and this is already a kind of a victory. And then culturally speaking as well, what little there still remains by the late 1970s by way of a counter-cultural critical public sphere just waned enormously. So the Left in the literary, humanistic academy became for me, as it has been for many people attempting to keep the head above water, a refuge. Initially I saw it as a great place to do politics, but increasingly it has

become a kind of a refuge place, maybe the only place where you can actually have serious conversations about some of these [aforementioned] things, where people look at you like you are not from another planet.

FG: In the introduction to *Reading North by South* you speak in relation to the testimonial genre about feelings of isolation and alienation as well as efforts to build some kind of intra-American solidarity. "[the testimonial position as some kind of] compensatory projection of the ex-New Left reader's own post-Vietnam experience of isolation and alienation", and some kind of "integrative politics of North-South solidarity tied up with a modernist discourse of aesthetic utopianism"³, what other possibilities do you see out there for the figure of the intellectual in the home of the brave? There are no easy answers, I realize.

NL: No, there are not. I see the *testimonio* industry among some Latinamericanists in the 1980s and 1990s as the beginning of what we have now, effectively the separation of Latinamericanism in US Universities from the great revolutionary, mass movements in Latin America that really revived Latinamericanism, and gave it its present shape in many ways, for me in the early 1970s. 1990 is a pretty crucial year, the defeat of the Sandinistas, the end of the Sandinista Revolution, the perceived end among Latinamericanists and Latin Americans in the US on the Left, academics, critics and intellectuals, a function of their engagement was forever removed from these movements. The developments in Latin America from 1990 on left radical Latinamericanists in the North high and dry. I see very definitely a turn around that time from a form of Latinamericanism, if not Marxist per se at least that understood itself to be an intellectual expression of movements in the South turning against itself and making forays into some kind of poststructuralist-influenced theory in most cases that has almost become a sort of false consciousness as I see it. I mean, it has not fully taking in, and digested and submitted to critique, including a self-critique, the defeats essentially of 1990 and subsequently. I see that what I wrote in *Reading North by South* is still probably worse now than it was then. And part it is a function of the dialectical flip side of what it was so good about the 1970s and part of the 1980s. I think many of us were not prepared for what is to come, had no real theoretical, critical standpoint from which to figure out how to weather a period of profound

counter-revolution that we are going through and people do not know how to establish a position, politically and historically, in response to that, and the response has been in some ways to descend to the nether world of some sort of theory that has become purely reflexive and does not really know how to look at Latin American any more and has become it some kind of an abstraction⁴.

3. ABOUT CURRENT CONTRACTIONS, REGRESSIONS, RETREATS

FG: So it is not just that it is a counter-revolutionary, you do see the intelligence inside some academic sectors, mostly Latinamericanism, not quite keeping up with the times, which you would define as a moment of contraction, perhaps.

NL: Right. Yes, contraction, withdrawal. It is a very complicated form of movement intellectually because it is also in some level some opening too. The whole increase of interest into what now, I suppose, goes under the term of the "subaltern" among others, does represent in some sense a genuine effort at critique and self-critique. That is to say, it is initially as a result of a perceived need, a necessity, to question a form of political and intellectual engagement that has prevailed in the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s, essentially based on dependency theory, doctrines of national liberation, a kind of Marxism that was associated with that, and that it pinned virtually all of its hopes on the success or at very least the survival of things like Sandinismo. And when that there was an intellectual vacuum created that has been filled with a whole variety of things, not just subaltern studies, but also identity politics, cultural studies, etc. that in the end is more notable for what it is not than for the kinds of undecidabilities and quandaries that it mediates and that it manifests and that proposes in a positive, intellectual sense.

4. THE INDISPENSABLE ENGAGEMENT WITH LUKÁCS FOR ANY RIGOROUS PROJECT WITHIN THE TRADITION OF MARXIST LITERARY AESTHETICS

FG: One attitude could perhaps say that, "look this is the situation and I just don't care. I just don't see any openings of any sort." But this is not what I hear you saying. There is instead the sense that you have been taking blows.

NL: Yes, right. In a personal, political and intellectual, I, like many others, kind of had to beat a strategic retreat. The life of what goes on in the classroom, the academic journal, conferences, what one writes and publishes, and what one does out on the streets, could somehow be part of a common project if not disappeared has become extremely difficult. There are people who do it. There are comrades from older time who do it, who still manage to do it. I sort of tip my hat to them for having the integrity and strength to do it. I haven't been able to do it. That is to say, I had to devise other ways, not very systematically, of being true to what I think is the tradition of Marx and the Left within a far more restricted space. I am not the sort of Marxist or activist, past or present, that believes that nothing that goes on in the academy is of any importance, that if you are not in the streets, if you are not organizing that you are doing nothing. That is frankly an anti-intellectual position that is far too easy to take in the US, which has a deep tradition of anti-intellectualism. But without some kind of mediated connection between what happens in the public sphere, what happens in the streets, what happens vis-à-vis essentially class issues in the University itself as a capitalist institution so to speak and what happens in the intellectual discourse in the classroom, this cannot be severed, this must be maintained. The question is, how do you that? I would say two things here. One fairly intra-institutional and intra-academic, which is for me the classroom has become a much more important site, working with students, including work individually with students, mediated by at some level by some Left-wing thought, or by Marxism and a host of other things, it has assumed a correspondingly greater importance for me. The few students that I have who seem to me like I was when I was that age in some ways, that is in that they are open to anything in principle, who are eager and hungry for a critical standpoint, for doing work in critical theory, for doing work that has some Marxist and anti-capitalist inflection are for me enormously important. There are small conjunctures: if anything saves what we call the profession now is the work with students, because in my experience, even if there has been a tremendous shutdown of intellectual, critical horizons, in relation to young people now, in comparison to my student generation, and this could easily be a kind of a self-serving statement, but it is not nearly as bad as people make out. I do see a remarkable opening or openness for critical thinking among students,

simply with not much of a knowledge base with which to have mined it. The other thing I was going to say in relation to the more general question of what it is to be in the US in relation to critical, intellectual projects, what it means to be a socially conscious Latinamericanist, and what should one do in a place like this, well, one survives as one can, but I think work in the classroom and in whatever openings there are in the public sphere [continues to be important]. I would say the following: for better or for worse, and I think for better, Georg Lukács (1885-1971) is the one really serious, rigorous, systematic Marxist literary critic. I think there has yet to be any of body of Marxist aesthetics or Marxist literary criticism that can begin to match it. Lukács is a great teacher. I mean, reading and re-reading at first the middle period, the Lukács of the historical novel, the Lukács of the Young Hegel, even the Lukács of the destruction of reason, which is a kind of *libro maldito*, the one everybody loves to hate, I think for anyone interested and seriously engage with a project of Marxist aesthetics it is indispensable. One has to go through it. One has to digest it. One has to learn it. And the reason simply is that it is the only body of Marxist thinking from the last century that fully integrates into its thinking mechanism Marx and capital. Lukács knew Marx better probably than anyone else and this is reflected in and this is all mediated systematically in everything he writes, also mediated is Lukács's political allegiances, at some point he himself frankly admitted, after being rebuked for *History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* in the 1920s and essentially forced to disavow or at least aspects of it to remain part of the Communist movement, he essentially made the decision that membership in the Party was his, I forgot how he put it, his "entry ticket to History." Everything that Lukács wrote reflects a belief and commitment in Bolshevism and Leninism. So that is the great limitation of Lukács, the fact that the entry ticket into History eventually led him where we are now, not to where he thought it would lead. To go back, the second book, *Reading North by South*, reflects a period of four to six years in which I did nothing but to read Lukács and think about how one could possibly do Latinamerican literary criticism in a Lukácsian spirit, which seems on the face of it, against the grain. I would say the third book, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas*⁵ [*Determinations* from here on], whether within Latinamericanism or not, since about 1996 or so,

reflects an odd kind of evolution in a chronological sense backwards within Lukácsian Marxism in the direction of *History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* above all, and even things like the pre-Marxist theory of the novel, and much more systematically into critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition in a broad sense, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin to some extent, but Adorno above all. A friend of mine who did not think very highly of the Frankfurt School critical theory-styled critique once described Lukács's *History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* the *fons et origo* of all of what came later to be known Western Marxism, which I think is quite true. This is the reason why one must know this book backward and forward if one is to work anything and claim to be within that critical, theoretical tradition in the strict orthodox sense. So I would say if I have any kind of philosophical primer would be that book and the Lukács of that moment, and the moment leading up to it. And that is to say, the Hegelian Lukács, the Lukács who was in fact sharply critical not just of vulgar materialism, but also of a certain notion of historical materialism as well. And I think that the kind of space that opens up for debate, inquiry and speculation between the Lukács of *History and class consciousness* and what ultimately gave birth to, at least for me, essentially Adorno -his aesthetic theory, negative dialectics, critical defense of modernism and the avant-garde- lies a space in which the future of Marxist critique is to be written, it seems to be. This is where the interesting questions arise. I think the last book is sort of a tentative willingness to enter into that space where there are more questions than answers.

5. SEEKING THE INSPIRATION IN THE WORK OF ROBERTO SCHWARZ

FG: What about a critical self-assessment of your scholarship in terms of things left undone, possible blind spots, an awareness of limitations, things to improve, etc., like when you look at your three books, what is it that leaves you still unhappy?

NL: I could talk into the next week about what I am unhappy. One of the critics and scholars who as you and anyone who has read my last two books know, I most admire, and try to model my work on, whose work I tend to imitate is Roberto Schwarz in Brazil. Schwarz in some

ways to me among the Marxist literary scholars and critics, the sort of philosophically grounded critical thinkers in aesthetics and culture that I am aware of, the one who I think I most admire [because] he seems to have found a way to be an essayist and to be a Brazilianist, to work very much in the interstices of his own national cultural scene, but also to be capable of producing serious monographs, for example he is, I think probably without question, the most serious student and scholar of Machado de Assis (1839-1908). He spent years at it and he has written a one incredible tour de force on him, *A master on the periphery of capitalism: Machado de Assis*⁶ that just came out in English in the last few months as well as many essays. One would wish, one would want to be able to do something like that. I am not sure if it is in me to do this kind of serious, in some ways very traditional, monographic, consistent approach to a corpus. If there is time enough, I would love to do something like that. I think that is something that is lacking all over what I have done until now. In some ways, one of the wonderful things in my experience about Marxism, whether one regards it as ultimately true or false, is a theory with a tremendous explanatory power. It enables you to talk about many things reasonably intelligently so there is therefore the temptation to continue talking about many things reasonably intelligently and not following the example of Marx, if no one else, and actually spending fifteen or twenty years on one subject, and make it more profound, to deepen it, to work in relation to the object essentially - Machado de Assis, the capitalist mode of production or whatever it may be - and allowing it to set the terms of the task at hand, to be the substance, the mediating space for work as a Marxist. That is something one would want to do. At this point I would like to contemplate doing, I would like to do, I have no idea what it would be, when or how, whether it is in me to do it. In that line, coincidentally, I think if I had two years without having to teach with full pay the book that I would do is probably on Marx and Capital. I have taught it now a couple of times and generated significant pile of lecture notes on it, and what a literary critic might do with that book which I think never has been done. But in order to do it, I would need to sit down and at least spend a year just reading what people have written about it, for which I simply do not have the time to do. If it were not Marx, it would be something else. Essentially to move beyond the essay form, [this is what I am suggesting]. And to do a book length study on

something, which is something that in the present way our life as academics in the marginal world of the humanities and given the constraints we work on is very difficult to do. I am not going to get a grant from the Ford Foundation to write a book about *Capital*.

6. A FEW BOUNDARIES IN THE AESTHETIC TERRITORY

FG: How would you set up the boundaries of your own imaginary and real territory in relation to your interest and preoccupation with the aesthetic? I would say that I see the centrality of the form of the novel, the visibility of the Boom moment, a desire to cling to the notion of realism, and now you have highlighted the centrality of the essay form. Say, you don't do theater, you do not do poetry. You will not do pre-nineteenth century dimensions, say the Baroque. What would Neil Larsen's favorite historical moment be?

NL: It is funny that you ask the question. I never actually thought about it that way but it is true that the nineteenth century is the starting point, although empirically speaking I do more work on the twentieth. The text that I teach for example as a point of departure in classrooms, or do in conference papers, tends to be fairly contemporary, modern things, because I never thought of myself as a nineteenth century person. As a Latinamericanist, I am interested in the nineteenth century, because it is measured differently [in the sense that] many of the literary questions and aesthetic problematics that in the European context are nineteenth century ones become in Latin America twentieth century [issues], with important differences. That problem in and of itself interests me, that is to say if we sort of follow people like Angel Rama and others, what is now standard wisdom, that in seeing the twentieth century as the great moment of the novel and not the nineteenth century, there is the whole question that follows, "what does it mean to produce novels in twenty century conditions in those particular forms of modernity in a place like Latin America?" It seems to be that in and of itself, whether consciously or not, it has been the kind of problem that I am trying to deal with. And Lukács has been both interesting and limiting since the Lukácsian theoretical edifice is built essentially entirely on nineteenth century classical novel production and also, and to some extent, and this is the less well-known Lukács, on early twentieth century Soviet fiction, at least

on the social realism that Lukács regarded as genuine. As it is indicated in the subtitle of the last book, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas*, "narrative" is a word I prefer. I am interested in narrative as form, whether fictional or not. I have been incorporating into my graduate seminars in Latin American literature a great deal more of narratology as such, strict, fairly technical, logical analyses of various kinds, which I think it is still a useful discipline, I am not sure I would call it a theory. Still overall adhering too, what I think is at the core of Lukács, is the notion of mimesis, an alien realist aesthetic theory in that sense. And it is also what attracts me so much to Schwarz. But willing to be much more open and more inquisitive as to what forms narrative realism could or might take in modern or contemporary situations not strictly metropolitan, whether in Latin America or in the US, which might not [follow strictly this aesthetic]. If I ever did sort of adhere to Lukács' Party line on what is good Socialist or Socialist-friendly narrative and what is not, I no longer do. It seems to me that in that sense I am more Adornian than Lukácsian. It seems to me that one cannot simply read Kafka for example and make a few nods in the direction of what is all that is brilliant about Kafka was to conclude in the end that Kafka was the hopeless product of the imperial period in which [he happened to live] and that he is a literary version of existentialism. This [reading] simply does not work, if for no other reason that the Kafkaesque elements in Latin American fiction cannot be explained that way, they point at something else. I am not sure exactly where all of this, in terms of a historical moment, is going to lead. I am as interested in contemporary things as I am in more classical or canonical texts. I frankly tend to write and publish more about canonical texts because these are frankly what I teach and I have not found a way to have the time to produce in the form of critical essays anything that isn't in some ways a product of spade done for seminars. So this is a kind of limitation. I've got to find a way to teach seminars that are less orthodox, less kinds of obvious in narrative genres. I am interested for example, I would use the word *testimonio* because it is too loaded a term, a whole huge body of non-fictional narratives, chronicles, histories, anecdotal histories, memoirs, etc. that came out of Latin America in periods of arm struggle, the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, in the case of Argentina, Peru, Chile, there is a huge body of kind of unofficial histories. I am thinking in particular of the three-

volume work called *La Voluntad* by Martín Caparrós and Eduardo Anguita, published in the last ten years in Argentina, totally told from the standpoint of a sort of stringing together the personal experiences of various actors in the scene of the clandestine Left in Argentina from about the late 1960s to the Malvinas War in 1983. I have read pieces of it. I haven't had time to read the whole thing but this is the kind of narrative that is hugely interesting to read and possibly occupies the kind of space, within what used to be a more belletristic set of readerly demands, that functions as literature or at least potentially fulfills this kind of expectation in a certain set of conditions and this is extremely interesting to look at. But I don't know. I mean, at this point I don't have a well thought-out agenda.

7. MIMESIS, OR THE ABSOLUTE POINT OF AESTHETIC DEPARTURE

FG: You have written that "Marxism entails an uncompromising rejection of modernism as an aesthetic and a concomitant advocacy of realism" (*Reading North by South*⁷), do you still feel this way?

NL: No. I think the underlying philosophical basis, which leads Lukács into effectively saying that is at core still correct. Let us put it that way: I think those forms -philosophical, aesthetic, literary politics- that flow from them, that are a defense or an apology for an avant-garde are severely flawed, and there is still a dominant tendency among academics and intellectuals in the US and elsewhere, in Latin America too, to continue and to see themselves as the defenders of whatever passes for the avant-garde at the moment. That is to say, avant-gardist understanding of what the political, social, psycho-analytical efficacy of literary and aesthetics is, which, I think, must at least be looked at very critically. We all talk about "revolutionary aesthetics," or works that had a "revolutionary impact," or we used to, as we knew what we were talking about, but no one knows what these things mean. But I think that Lukács was closer to these than anyone else. When it comes down to it I think there is a fundamental battle at the level of aesthetics between an aesthetic that is articulated with some social, emancipatory world-view, between mimesis and something else, maybe mimesis and a neo-Romantic aesthetic, which really sees the social and political role of the literary and the aesthetic to be that of producing a shock for

example or subverting something or defamiliarizing something, making it new, whichever version the avant-gardist principle you simply want to refer to. And I think I am still of the mimetic persuasion on this, that a literary philosophy that is not essentially in the last analysis based on the notion of mimesis, the notion of mimesis that begins with Aristotle's *Poetics*, but which is all over Plato as well, and then passes through people like Hegel and on into Marx and Lukács, is for me still the absolute point of [aesthetic] departure, whether that in turn leads to a literary politics that says that "if modernist, it is bad" is another question. I think that is mechanical and reductive [way of thinking].

8. ABOUT THE AESTHETIC AS AN UNCOMPROMISINGLY HOSTILE AND NEGATIVE RELATION TO THAT WHICH IS

FG: Why the emphasis on the aesthetic? It seems to me that we all like Marcuse who, through Jameson, wants to rescue something of the idea of the "liberatory potential of the aesthetic." I am wondering what an aesthetic reflection on the non-aesthetic [will ever be or do for us here]. Why are we all [trapped] in the "aesthetic cage" if I may put it that way?

NL: Right. Well, as much as we all are. It seems to me that many people for perfectly good and honest reasons have decided that the aesthetic has passed into the garbage heap of history essentially and that we ought to talk about culture. That is essentially in some level the political instinct that lead into cultural studies and into this sort of moral sense that we as intellectuals in the humanities have no business in cultivating high art and literature anymore, since this is essentially what aesthetics mean, and we better get busy looking at what the masses are doing, because otherwise we have no way to actually legitimate what we actually do, which you know is a kind of survival instinct which I understand. But I think is based on completely false, reified notions of what the aesthetic and/or culture are. I mean, I subscribe more or less to what Adorno thinks about the aesthetic, and even Lukács in that sense, which is one of, and in some instances the preeminent medium for negativity. That which is aesthetic, it seems to me in present historical circumstances, is that which is most uncompromisingly hostile and negative in relation to that which is. So I do not dissociate

and think, one cannot dissociate in any way the aesthetic and negation.

FG: And negation would be the display of the shortcomings [of that which is]?

NL: Well, that, or simply the preservation at the level of form of another space or some sense of an alternative, some sense of the transformability, or at least the desire and need to transform, to make other than what it is, not just to make new but to make other. Now, how exactly is that viable, how is it that we recognize it when it happens, that is a very difficult question, which I think no one knows the answer to. And I don't think Lukácsian and Marxism have the answer in any way to that anymore, and I am not sure about Adorno for that matter [either]. But it seems to me that the whole tradition of aesthetic thinking and philosophy that frankly grows out of Hegel and classical German philosophy, it is already there in some level in Kant as well, which is modern aesthetics, it is a German philosophical pursuit, as in Friedrich Schelling for example, and it is premised in an uncompromising refusal to be reconciled to the existing capitalist, reified, debased order. It is when the aesthetic is conceived in such a way that it no longer has any point of mediation with the social and the political that it becomes a relic, it becomes something that has to be jumped. And I think that ironically that is what became in some version, some sort of garden variety version, of the modernist and avant-garde, which is, I think, in turn why some people, like John Beverley for example and many others who have embraced in general the cultural studies move, rejected. What I think they are rejecting, and this is explained in the introduction to *Reading North by South*, was essentially a modern aesthetic, which has already been reified, it seems to me, which it set itself up in, not an aesthetic that is somehow not provided with some form of negativity in relation to society, but one that tended to see negativity simply as some kind or a matter of isolation, producing perfectly autonomous aesthetic realms or sort of coming at society from some impossible point outside to sort of shake it up, turn it over, when in fact it never happens.

9. NO OPTION BUT REPRESENTATIONAL OR MIMETIC AESTHETICS

FG: Given your previous self-definition as someone of the "mimetic persuasion," I am wondering if you had thought about, or done work, within your favorite chronology, in relation to avant-garde painting or any other artistic vehicle that does things other than "representation" or "mimesis." Or even if you find this thought initially productive. Literary critics, it seems to me, and I put myself inside this group, are still kicking around the "representation" ball in the twenty-first century, when others in other environments are not playing this game anymore.

NL: To answer most specifically, no, I have not done any work on abstract art. I have certainly thought about it, talked about it but I think I would begin to answer by going back to something Jameson said somewhere, perhaps in the afterword to *Aesthetics and Politics*⁸, which is that all aesthetics in some level are representational or realist aesthetics, all of them will make the claim to represent something, to be realistic about something, even the most high-bound kinds of forms of abstractions, at some level are making the claim that the abstractions themselves are at some form representational, that they reproduce something, that they make tangible some aspect outside the work, which has the kind of a sensible, sensual correlative in the experience of the abstraction. I mean to call a work of art abstract in some sense is meaningless. It is full of color and form but it could not be less abstract. It is a question of form. I mean, I think the great missing category in much of vulgar Marxism, the kind of representationalist aesthetic that most of us associate with that work, you talk about a novel or a poem in thematic terms essentially or in terms of what it represents in naïve terms, the story it tells, the way our students react, "I like this book because the character was cool," that kind of mimetism is to be [rejected]. To fully develop a mimetic standpoint in aesthetics is to look at the question of form, and what the meta-properties of form are. This is something that Schwarz again is brilliant at doing. So it is a question of literary form, I suppose narrative form, this is what I am interested in, in its mimetic relation to social form for example, or forms of experience in only as mediated by these formal questions in relation to what are themselves the most immediate, empirical data of day- to-day existence.

FG: If anyone said to you, "look Neil, I am going to go down the non- representational road,

how far do you think I could go?" You would say, "not very far!"

NL: Yes, I would say, "that is what you think, because there is no such a road. I don't see how you can do it." Yes, I think in the end you are either doing it [the realist-mimetic-representational mode] consciously and self-critically, or you are doing it uncritically or unconsciously.

FG: I see you showing up dressed up in Luckácsian "realist" garb showing intellectual discontent. Would this be a fair characterization of you, Luckács is the place you must through if what you want is a Marxist reading of literary forms, particularly in relation to narrative?

NL: Yes, I would say so.

FG: What I do not know is how to interpret "rejection." I mean when you say that you "reject" modernism, and you have already nuanced this position beforehand, or postmodernism, postcolonial studies, etc. what is in your estimation the logical follow-up of this rejection? When you engage with polemics, what is the logical conclusion, when the dusk clears, what's the day after, what should follow rejection [what is the day after, the hangover of rejection, if I may put it in these terms]?

NL: I would revise what I think needs to be rejected or at least held in the most severe form of critical scrutiny and skepticism. It seems to be that what has to be rejected in the philosophical sense of working through. It is the whole tradition of French ideology and poststructuralism which is still, I think, the hegemonic one in some way or another, often unconsciously in literary, critical, theoretical circles, including Latinoamericanism now, in the US So the whole line which begins, and I emphasize that this must be read and work through and not something that is simply holding a prohibition written up against it, it begins with Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault and continues through with the various popularizations of Foucault in particular in cultural studies. I think in the US it is essentially a bastardized, popularized Foucaultianism. [Other names could be included such as] Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, etc., which I understand, and it is not that I have entirely worked my way through them, but I think I have a fairly nuanced and mediated view of these, and I do teach books by these French

poststructuralists in my critical theory classes, which essentially premise on a hostility of the dialectical tradition, Hegel, Marx, etc. I think being pretty much the main theme of much of French theory that at least gets exported to the US since essentially the eclipse of Sartre. And I think as an alternative to that, the tradition I would counterpoised to this in some general sense, is the whole tradition of critical theory, essentially the German school, Lukács, the Frankfurt School, to some extent Habermas, a lot of contemporary German working Marxism about which I know a little, since I have trained myself to read German, but about which essentially nothing is known in the US because we still get our theory in France still, essentially maybe through Spivak now, but we still get it from France. [...] About the unconscious side/s of latinamericanism

FG: Since you are a North-American scholar, there is the issue of the non- indigenous dimension of that tradition you value [the Marxist-Hegelian dialectical tradition in critical theory], and the "here." I mean, here I am talking with you at the University of California, Davis, and I am wondering if your heart is not elsewhere as a US North-American Latinamericanist talking about the Latinamerican dimension. Bluntly put, you are dealing with a foreign, non-indigenous, non-autochthonous, to both the US and Latin America, does that create any kind of problem or you just simply indigenize that product and no problem?

NL: No, I think it is a significant, I would not quite say a blind spot, but yes it is part of the unconscious of what I do, it seems to me. I have come more and more to this conclusion that asking myself, and this has come up in the lectures I have given around the country in the last year, about what it means to be a "Latinamericanist," and period, in the US It also comes up in my travels to Latin America, when I go visit my friend Roberto Schwarz, and the first question he asks me is, "so, what are people writing in the US?" And I have no idea. He tells me everything that is going on in Brazil and I can't tell him what is going on in the US because I don't follow it. I barely read newspapers anymore and barely US newspapers. And it certainly strikes me that there is somehow something missing here. And I think it is not just missing, there is a kind of negation here. And this is something I do bring up in the introduction to *Reading North by South*, which

is my personal sort of intellectual, political reasons for embracing Latinamericanism beginning in the 1970s had everything to do with disgust and anger and a rejection of my own "culture" and "national traditions," but also a kind of perplexity as to what to do with Latinamericanism. In other words, I think Latinamericanism of the kind that has come of age in the last ten or twenty years in the US, and the Latinamericanism of some of the people you are interviewing, bears within itself the trace of the experience of the New Left within the US, its disappointments, the disappointment of the revolution in the 1960s, it never occurred, it seemed be well under way in the cultural plane with politics coming next, if not the actual seizure of the state, at least something profound. In psychoanalytic terms, [there is a kind of] a repetitious compulsion to politics in the US It becomes for people like me, in Fichte's terms, "not an age, but a place of absolute sinfulness," it is evil.

FG: So Latinamericanism would be something like an utopian outlet that compensates, overcompensates or tries to, the wasteland of the immediacy, call it the US

NL: Yes, I would say for me that has been the case. And I think it is probably, whether acknowledged or not, for other people.

10. ABOUT SOME UNCONSCIOUS PATHOLOGY ACTUALLY INFORMING SOME NORTH-AMERICAN LATINAMERICANISM

FG: I do recall taking courses on American realism at Wake Forest University in my early years in the US It would be almost natural for someone like you following the inspiration of Lukácsian realism to incorporate something of this novelistic corpus made in the US However, I confess I did not enjoy those novels too much, though.

NL: Yes, right. This is something my friend Schwarz tells me, "why don't you do what I have done? Why don't you spend the rest of your life working on the lead North-American literary figure or corpus of texts that needs a Marxist critique or that would better suit or fit a Marxist critique or that needs a Marxist aesthetic approach?" What he says makes a lot of sense, and I say yes to this, but then it occurs to me it is probably too late. I would have to retrain myself. What about *Huckleberry Finn*? I will

[have to] write the great Marxist work on *Huckleberry Finn* [at least according to Schwarz].

FG: Not in any kind of silly way but you see what I am saying.

NL: Absolutely. I would say this is almost a pathology of North-American Latinamericanism, I think you put your finger very much on something there. And that has to be made self-conscious and acknowledged, because I think it has in part to do with the historical relationship between North and Latin America. It is a particular one. It is historically unique in a certain way. And it is in that historical relationship that is mediated in terms of personal experience and personal, intellectual, class formation in all sorts of ways. In some ways, it does ground, if it does not legitimize, to lay bare what the real political and intellectual grounds of Latin America in the US are. I could talk for a long time on this. It struck me too that what I experience when I go to Latin America when I go there, and among Latinamericans in the US, is a strange kind of feeling that I have gone home. I feel in some ways fundamentally, intellectually and culturally more at home in Latin America than here. But that already indicates that I am looking for some sort of home and that this isn't the right home. I think just having that experience of "home-coming" in a place one has never been, speaks to this kind of historical relationship, which is I think largely unconscious and largely hidden to view. And my best way of speculating about this now, sort of holding in my hand the morning coffee, is that for Marxists in the US, and for someone disgusted, alienated from the dominant cultural values of one's country, Latin America for all its catastrophes, is in some ways [a much better place]. In some ways, if you look at both North and South [in the Americas] as essentially colonial formations that enter very different historical paths that enter into relationship one with the other as neo-colonizer or imperialist to neo-colonized or imperialized, if you are correct for all of that, and you mediate all of that through that fundamental historical circumstance, then what happens in Latin America intellectually and [in] literary [form] is what might have happened here, but didn't. That is to say, for better and for ill I mean, the kind of intellectual society, the kind of literary life, the kind of critical, intellectual life that the North-American on the Left finds in Latin America so attractive, so appealing and so welcoming and

home-like, is in some sense a version of what it might have been here and it never did become. It might have become in the 1930s but didn't. Instead we horrendous and disastrous events of the imperial Pax Americana as it destroyed culture in the US, to put it bluntly. And the same sort of imperial order has destroyed a great deal in Latin America, but has not destroyed the culture. In some sense, Latin American culture, especially intellectual and literary culture, is what one would have wanted to have in one's own country, but it didn't, it can't, because this is the site of capitalism and empire.

11. THERE IS NO CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

FG: Let us imagine, I am an uncouth dean type out there talking to you in some cocktail party and I ask you, what do you mean by "culture," Neil? Because this is the wealthiest country in the world, let us go and get it. What is it that you want by "culture" because you don't mean "cultural studies," at least according to the way it is practiced by a few colleagues out there, right? So here we are in the site of empire and we are culture-less, which is what the cliché and your students will tell you, we have no history, no culture, no history, history is outside, culture is also outside, etc. I am not saying you are doing the same thing as your students, but there is a little of that here.

NL: No, I don't [generally mean cultural studies]. Let me intentionally put things in a severe and perhaps exaggerated way. I think there is no culture in the US in that sense. I think culture has been largely destroyed here. The definition of a definition, the sort of thumbnail sort of theoretical characterization of culture that, of the many that I have seen, that I like the best, comes from Samir Amin, First-World dependency theory Marxist: "Culture as the life-world that is unmediated by exchange value;" that is to say that is completely mediated by use value, that is not commodified, whose end is not in some level a reification or an exchange of commodities, or a kind of rationalized experience of the ultimate telos, which is simply, you know, more consumption or more possessive individualism. It is doing things, experiencing things, for their uselessness in a certain sense, which is ironically what use value is all about now it seems to me, in a kind of non-calculating, non-rationalizing way, it is simply out of love of society, love of particular forms of sensuous experience for their own sake, etc. It

seems to me that [culture] is something we experience largely or almost exclusively in contemporary world as vestiges of older, pre-capitalists forms of society and Latin America is still offers this experience in some forms, even in the most modern settings. This is already a kind of a caricature, but the enormous interest in poetry and literature, and talking about, and reading it, and staying up half a night talking about nothing else, that anyone will experience not just in Latin America, but about essentially every part of the world but here and Australia, I haven't been to Australia so I should not really say that, but you know, this is the norm, and this is culture, and it has been both, intentionally and unintentionally, whittled away to almost nothing in the US, and probably it is impossible to kill entirely.

FG: In *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies*⁹, the intellectual main course is located in the first chapter "Adorno and Marx and the German debates" included in *Aesthetics and Politics*¹⁰. How does all this travel and fare elsewhere in Latin America, and whether it is problematic or not?

NL: No, I think it is, although I think it is actually in some ways the subject of a recent issue of *Culture Critique*¹¹ that was edited by Silvia L. López, a colleague of mine, in which I was supposed to be involved in the co-editing, but ultimately could not do it. The two of us worked together to assemble and translate essays by a variety of Latinamerican critics that work in that tradition. I worked along with her up to the point of the production of the thing. The actual trick was to find the people. And there is actually to be more than one would have thought. There are contributions there from Beatriz Sarlo and Nicolás Casullo in Argentina, Schwarz in Brazil, a very interesting couple who have worked together, Paulo Eduardo Arantes and Otilia B.F. Arantes, a philosopher and an architectural critic, who worked very much in the kind of Marxist critical theory tradition, of Fernando Haddad, and there are other people. There are there, clearly it is not the dominant one, but so in working as a Latinamericanist, who is also at the same time a critical theorist in that tradition, one has to be content with the fairly limited array of Latinamerican theorists upon whom to base oneself or with whom to collaborate, but there are there. And I think one is here largely blazing in a sort of "haciendo el camino al andar." About the inevitable and no-

good general geography of Latin American studies

FG: In relation to your geography of Latin American Studies, I do not quite see you attached to any one area or region in particular. You have done work on Mexican literature (Juan Rulfo quickly comes to mind), Caribbean literature, contemporary Brazil, Boom authors, etc. Is this generalism a good thing or a bad thing? Or is this the only possibility in the US?

NL: I don't think it is a good thing. Let us put it this way: I think *vis-à-vis* the classroom, it is some kind of necessary evil. Inevitably in teaching Latin American literature, one needs to put a bit of everything, so one becomes a kind of a generalist, whether one wants to or not. But the alternative to that is generally choosing a region or a period, but that seems to me to be problematic as well, partly because in taking as Latin America as an intellectual object from the US, and one needs to, because that says something about the relationship between North and South, it seems to me, that one needs to be aware of, that one must somehow pass through. Yes, along with this kind of nagging sense that I ought to spend something like ten years working monographically and produce not just a collection of essays but a study, I also think that I ought to narrow down the focus a bit. In some ways I don't think I haven't been able to do it until now because I haven't really been satisfied that I have the intellectual, theoretical sophistication and background to do it. I mean, the danger in specializing is always that one becomes a kind of archivist or one loses track of the totality or the whole as mediated in one particular place. To be able to write on something very well focused and very concrete and to do so without simply becoming a kind of a specialist. But then the question is, what (else) do I do? And my problem is that this [situation] changes from one month to the next. I mean, I began in the 1980s as a Latinamericanist with a strong personal connection to the Caribbean, and that seemed to be the way I was going to go. And that sort of switched to the Southern Cone and the Andes, which has become and commanded my interest, more than other places, [if only by] default. I don't know. I have a kind of a strong personal and intellectual hesitation about specializing so to speak, about establish for myself that kind of division of labor. I think, on the one hand, that I need to do it. It is ultimately necessary. The question is sort of how to overcome both subjectively and

objectively the danger of being pigeonholed, or then therefore falling into one of the multiple little cracks in "business-as-usual" in the discipline of literary studies in the US Universities, which is, it seems to me, tantamount to intellectual suicide.

FG: Part two in *Determinations* is a concrete engagement with concrete Boom authors (Rulfo, Carpentier, Cortázar, Vargas Llosa). Yet, they don't look inviting and fresh any longer, do they? But I am also guessing that this is the way for scholarship to gain some visibility. I mean, the dividing line, at least chronologically, is pre-Boom and post-Boom in the US, right? There is something about the Boom object of study that does not titillate you anymore, and you say so, you critique Cortázar, Vargas Llosa, etc. So there you are holding hands with a collection of well-known, worn-out male authors. I am wondering [how you would talk about this photo-op].

NL: Empirically this is simply a consequence of the fact that these are the texts I had to teach, and that I had to teach or I was expected to teach, and increasingly since one gets to keep on teaching what one has taught before, because it saves time, and one does not have time to develop new approaches often, I kept on teaching [these same texts]. I think there is an advantage if what one is doing is unusual or novel or sort of heterodox in actually using orthodox texts. It is extremely well-known estrangement effect, if not an actual cliché, that there is a sort of extremely familiar objects that somehow make it easier to do something unorthodox. Part of it too probably has also to do in my reading habits that I do probably remain on the classical or conservative side. I actually haven't been able to keep up with the latest Latinamerican literary production as I would like to. I also haven't been terribly inspired to do it. What I have seemed to figure out is that the only way I can do this is by teaching it, and I hope I might be able to do that next year.

FG: I am now after the explicit rendering of your notion of "historically grounded postcolonial studies" perhaps side by side your favorite Lukásian territory (the "realist (largely nineteenth century according to Lukács) banner" while resisting the centrality of the fundamental tension between the moment of (high) modernism (first half of the twentieth century,

vicinity of the first World War), and the second half of the twentieth century.

NL: In some ways, the expression of "historically grounded postcolonial studies" is more diplomatic one than it is intellectually consistent. I am not sure there can be such a thing as a "historically grounded postcolonial studies," since postcolonial studies came into being in the US and now has become quasi institutionalized, or what most people associate with it, is, I think, governed by a textualist approach to things, not a historicist one at all. So to talk about a "historically grounded postcolonial studies" is essentially to do something that is essentially talking about what postcolonial studies is not, or only with difficulty could refer to itself in that way. And again, it is not just only "going back," and whatever this "going back" might mean, and doing the kind of work that prevailed among Latinamericanists in the 1970s, under some sort of the aegis of dependency theory either, which, you know, [one could say perhaps] vulgarly speaking it was vulgar Marxist [form of Latinamericanism]. Once again, Schwarz is the form of Latinamericanism that I have in mind here, qua Brazil qua Machado for example, that is to say, work is very grounded in one particular place and conjuncture, and a particular national problematic, which I do think is the question of the nation, which I am sure will come up here, [since it] continues to be not only viable but [a] necessary mediation, but one that essentially incorporates the insights of the best Marxist scholarship, that is to say, the Frankfurt School on how narrative, literary or aesthetic form and social form and historically concrete moments, particularities, conjunctures, etc. all mediate each other and fit together. In other words, it seems to me that one could identify certain fundamental nodes, let us say, Buenos Aires, the early twentieth century up until Borges, a certain kind of development at the level of the narrative form, sort of all three together that would constitute a very rich area in which to work, and I already some people are already working on these things. It is not to say that the same period of time, say in Honduras, would produce that. It might not. In other words, Latin America has to be subjected to a kind of a historical [perspective] with almost a strategic sense as to where things were happening, where the nodes or conjunctures were that determined what happened in other parts of Latin America, [since] Latin America is not a homogeneous

expanse, so "historically grounded" [must be understood] in that sense.

FG: Would it be fair to say that "historically grounded" is something close to "site-specificity"?

NL: Well, it could be, but it seems to me that because modernity or capitalism, wherever you are, and especially in a place like Latin America, is the product of uneven or unequal development, it is not everywhere equally, it is in some places and times and not [with the same intensity or thoroughness] in others, and the point is to know which places and which times. In some cases, it is obvious, it is the cities. In some cases, it is not so obvious. So, I guess in a way going back to the dangers I see in specialization, regionalization and periodization as habitually practiced is that there is no notion of this. It is just well, take the globe, spin it, put your finger on somewhere and start there as well as somewhere else. That is not what I would call "historically grounded." But yes, one could argue instead for a "site specific[ity] in a historical sense," or perhaps better, "conjuncture-specific."

FG: Because there's got to be something of a tension, let us say, between "site-specificity" and any notion of "theory," be it a point of convergence, an explanatory model or anything else you might want to understand by that notion.

NL: It is, I think, what goes under the name, inside some circles, especially Adornian ones, of the notion of "immanent critique." It is a critique that grows out of an initial sort of acceptance of the object for itself, without imposing on it from the beginning a certain set of theoretical demands. It is seen in what Adorno says about the essay and the essay as form. It is looking at the object in itself as a node of mediation, a place in which theory and actual sort of cultural immediacy or experience, mediate each other and draw the theory out of the object rather than imposing it on the object [from the beginning]. [...]

12. ABOUT THE APPEARANCE OF NO HISTORICAL MEDIATION WITHIN HISTORICO-SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF CAPITALIST EXISTENCE

FG: You speak of "culture" as a mediational link between the world of political praxis and the

given, subjective experience of social individuals. The ultimate horizon of material and social mediation. And then my question goes back to the previous reference. Does this mean you don't quite buy Jameson's "vanishing mediator" explanation as included in the previous volume for which you wrote the prologue?

NL: What is interesting here is that, and I have been reminded about it in my teaching of *Capital*, the notion of "vanishing mediators" comes from Marx. Let us see if I can reconstruct this: Marx at several point in the first volume of *Capital* remarks on the way in which the theoretical categories and abstractions, which are both necessary in order to approximate capitalism as an object of critique, as an object of theory or systematization, say "exchange," "division of labor," "use value," "commodity," "value form," "money form," etc., are also the product of Capital in the sense that they reflect social conditions of being brought about by capitalism itself. But there is something peculiar about capitalism as a social formation, or as a form of the social, which is, it establishes and reproduces itself, it makes it seem as though these categories and abstractions, which in fact were involved in the genesis and formation of capital, were always there. In other words, they are the vanishing mediators. So, take "money," which has a history, the history of which essentially comes into its own finally with fully operational capitalism, takes on the appearance within capitalist social conditions of existence, of always having existed, of having no historical mediation. That is what I take to mean the origin of this term that comes from Marx, which may pass through Weber to everybody else. So, I suppose as a Marxist what I would want to do is what Marx does here, which is three things really: to work with these mediating abstractions and theoretical terms, which are in some sense universal in so far as capital is universal for example, to refuse to dehistoricize them, or to refuse to let the historically-mediated character disappear, but also acknowledge that there is a tendency automatically within modernity for these mediations to disappear. In other words, for the actual theoretical categories and abstractions that are used that are part of the mediating activity that goes on in critique to suddenly become reified and to take on, or seem to, have always being there, that they are not, so to speak, an aspect of the object itself, but something that was in the air and sort of came

into your head as a kind of a Kantian a priori.
[...]

FG: Thank you very much, Neil.

NOTAS

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² Neil Larsen (Ph.D., University of Minnesota, USA), Professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory, Co-Director, Program in Critical Theory, at the University of California, Davis. Larsen has written and lectured widely on Latin American literature and society, postcolonialism, and Marxism and Critical Theory. He is the author of *Modernism and Hegemony* (1990), *Reading North by South* (1995), and *Determinations* (2001). His current projects include a book of essays on changes in the written form of dialectical thought in Hegel, Marx, Lukács and Adorno.

³ Larsen, Neil, *Reading North by South*, Minnesota, 1995, 16.

⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁵ Id., *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas*. London, Verso, 2001.

⁶ Schwarz, R., *A master on the periphery of capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2001.

⁷ Larsen, Neil, *Reading North by South*, op. cit., 19.

⁸ Jameson, F., "Afterword", in Bloch, Ernst et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*. London, Verso, 1977.

⁹ Larsen, N., *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies*. Vol. 71: *Theory and history of literature series*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

¹⁰ Adorno, T., "Adorno and Marx and the German debates", in Bloch, Ernst et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*. London, Verso, 1977.

¹¹ *Culture Critique*, 49 (Fall 2001).