CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Literary Politics and Geopolitics

Today’s global political situation is characterised by wars, increasingly overt imperialist ambitions and rivalries, power struggles, and hegemonic conflicts over new spheres of influence. Colonial dependencies have also been revived, often manifesting as access to raw materials and licences for their unhindered extraction. The idea of a “new world order” based on globalisation, which was promoted until recently, has given way to a new combination of isolationism and imperialism. This brings us to the inevitable, and perhaps somewhat naïve, question: What role can literature play in this situation, which is admittedly painted in somewhat dystopian terms? Can it (still) serve as a register, a medium for recording and processing global conditions and interactions? Or do these ultimately transcend the scope of literature? Is it possible to record conditions in such a way that they can be perceived as changeable? Can the achievements of political novels be simply scaled up to a global framework? To put it bluntly: In our project, we assume that there is such a thing as contemporary political literature—but is there also such a thing as geopolitical literature?

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Literary Politics and Geopolitics: An Introduction

Working Paper

Literary Politics and Geopolitics: An Introduction

By: Ivana Perica, Aurore Peyroles, Patrick Eiden-Offe

Lisa Katharina Schmitz: Beyond Geopolitical Imagery: Vulnerable Bodies in Mohsin Hamid’s "Exit West" (2017)

This article reads Mohsin Hamid’s Exit West (2017) as a critique of classical geopolitical imaginaries, shifting the focus from territories and nation-states to the vulnerable bodies that bear the material consequences of geopolitical violence. Bringing Hamid’s novel into dialogue with the geopolitical writings of Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellén, and Karl Haushofer, it examines how classical geopolitics mobilizes bodily metaphors—of health, mutilation, pressure, and suffocation—to naturalize territorial claims and obscure individual suffering. Exit West, by contrast, foregrounds fragmented, porous, and mobile bodies, rendering war and migration as embodied and relational experiences. Drawing on phenomenology and Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality, the article argues that Hamid unsettles the rigid distinctions between body and space, self and other, and migrant and native that underpin geopolitical thinking. Through its sustained attention to bodily vulnerability and interdependence, the novel redirects geopolitical imagination from the threatened body of the state to the human bodies upon which political violence is ultimately enacted.

Beyond Geopolitical Imagery: Vulnerable Bodies in Mohsin Hamid’s "Exit West" (2017)

By: Lisa Katharina Schmitz

Korbinian Lindel: Geopolitical Aesthetics

This article examines the aesthetic dimension of classical geopolitics in the early twentieth century. Contrary to the assumption that literary and fictional devices were incorporated into geopolitical discourse only retrospectively, it argues that they were intrinsic to it from the outset. Drawing on Karl Haushofer, Adolf Grabowsky, Ewald Banse, Robert Müller, and Samuel P. Huntington, it identifies three interconnected strategies: the sensory and affective representation of geopolitical space, the imaginative projection of future world orders, and the aesthetic popularisation of geopolitical knowledge. Metaphors, speculative scenarios, and “expressionist” maps and diagrams were designed not merely to inform, but to shape perception and political action. Geopolitics thus emerges as a genuinely literary-aesthetic discourse whose persuasive force depends substantially on forms of aesthetic evidence. A literary analysis is therefore not only possible but essential to understanding geopolitical thought.

Working Paper

Geopolitical Aesthetics

By: Korbinian Lindel

Louis Aubry: Writing and Unmaking the Geopolitical in "Un captif amoureux"

This paper examines Jean Genet's "Un captif amoureux" (1986) as a literary deconstruction of the geopolitical. Focusing on Genet's memories of the Palestinian struggle in Jordan and Lebanon, it argues that the work unsettles the certainties underlying geopolitical thought: territorial borders, national identities, and the supposedly objective categories of political discourse. Its fragmented chronology and free association disregard spatial continuity, replacing cartographic space with a ground-level, phenomenological experience of land and belonging. Genet also exposes geopolitical abstractions as images and myths, contrasting them with embodied experiences of displacement, violence, and everyday life. The Palestinian struggle is consequently presented not simply as a national conflict but as a challenge to the nation-state's logic of territorial belonging. Through its hybrid form, "Un captif amoureux" thus "translates" geopolitical assemblages while simultaneously dismantling them, opening onto a conception of space beyond fixed borders and identities.

Writing and Unmaking the Geopolitical in "Un captif amoureux"

By: Louis Aubry

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

This paper develops the concept of "political fictionality" to examine the relationship between literature, ideology, and geopolitical power in the work of Vladislav Surkov, published under the pseudonym Natan Dubovitskii. Focusing on The Imitation of Homer (2019), it argues that fiction functions not primarily as a vehicle for ideological propaganda, but as a laboratory in which political narratives, contradictions, and models of territorial power can be tested. The novel's depiction of the Donbas war oscillates between competing geopolitical, existential, and dystopian frames, ultimately revealing the instability of political meaning itself. Surkov's literary and political authorship converge in a practice of "shadow ideology": the controlled circulation of alternative narratives that accommodate ambiguity and uncertainty without undermining the broader ideological framework. Literature thus becomes a technology of political imagination, blurring the boundary between representing geopolitical reality and actively shaping its conditions of intelligibility.

Working Paper

Political Fictionality and the Authorship of Power: Vladislav Surkov between Literature and Geopolitics

By: Ekaterina Vassilieva

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

Using Seghers' novella Der Führer as a case study, the article demonstrates how literature can model geopolitical dynamics. It argues that the text transforms the asymmetry between imperial power and local resistance into a literary model of the limits of geopolitics. Set during Fascist Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, the Italian geologists' pursuit of territory and mineral resources in the novela reflects an imperial logic based on spatial control and exploitation. Yet the landscape itself becomes a weapon: guided by the Ethiopian Ato, the conquerors' technological and military superiority is undermined by their ignorance of the local environment. Through the novella's interplay of space, religion, beauty, and sacrifice, Seghers confronts abstract geopolitical strategies with material and cultural realities. Der Führer thus presents literature as a form of political theory that reveals how power depends on context – and how apparently powerless actors can turn the conditions of imperial domination against their conquerors.

Working Paper

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

By: Max Roehl

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

This paper reads Mike Phillips' A Shadow of Myself (2000) as a post-Cold War thriller through an Afropean lens. I argue that the novel transforms the genre of the political thriller by exposing the dissolution of its Cold War framework: former spies and informers navigate the aftermath of vanished states, while global capitalism emerges as a new structuring force. At the same time, Phillips activates rather than simply reproduces the genre's stereotypes of Eastern Europe. Through its geography of London, Prague, Berlin and Moscow, and through the intertwined histories of its Ghanaian, British, Russian, German and Czech characters, the novel challenges rigid East–West binaries and notions of a white Europe. Its focus on Black mobility, belonging and transnational identity anticipates later Afropean discourse. Thus, A Shadow of Myself emerges as both a critique of the political thriller and a pioneering exploration of Afropean Europe.

Mike Phillips' "A Shadow of Myself": Reading a post-Cold War Thriller through an Afropean Lens

By: Fanny Wehner

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

This paper examines Nikolaj Krylenko's Through the Unexplored Pamirs (1929), based on his participation in the Soviet-German Alay-Pamir Expedition of 1928. It asks how travel writing, geopolitics, and early Soviet tourism intersect in the representation of the Pamirs. I argue that Krylenko transforms the sublime from an aesthetic experience into a practical and ideological ethos of disciplined tourism. His narrative maps the region as a strategic corridor toward Afghanistan, India, and China, while reducing its landscape to routes, resources, and previously "blank" spaces awaiting epistemic and territorial incorporation. At the same time, the arduous experience of climbing becomes a form of self-education and physical discipline. The Pamirs gradually lose their exceptional status and become athletic objectives and spaces prepared for future tourists. Krylenko's travelogue thus participates in the Soviet production of geopolitical space by linking cartographic knowledge, bodily endurance, and the transformation of the sublime into sport.

Working Paper

Mapping the Sublime: Travel Writing and the Geopolitics of the Soviet Pamirs

By: Marina Sivak

Nenad Ivić: Arcana Imperii and Globalatinization: A Probe Into Contemporary Cultural Style

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

Arcana Imperii and Globalatinization: A Probe Into Contemporary Cultural Style

By: Nenad Ivić