

**21L.488 Contemporary Literature**  
**MIT Spring 2008**  
**Professor Sarah Brouillette**

**Realism**

Realism is a mode of literary expression often mentioned in discussions of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

How accurate is that? What KIND of realism do we find in this work, if any?

Classic realism is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic / movement / form of novel writing in which **characters**, situations, and settings are represented in a "realistic" manner; an "objective" figure narrates events but doesn't experience them; and the author strives for accuracy of detail. The idea is to achieve a faithful depiction of common lives and experiences.

One of the most famous defenders of realism, and one whose thoughts relate to Mistry's work, was Georg Lukács, a Marxist theorist now associated with what is known as social or critical realism (though classic realism was really his thing)

Here is a summary of Lukács' ideas about realism, as expressed in *The Historical Novel* (1937):

- He disliked the formal innovations of modernist writers, such as Kafka or **Joyce**; he preferred writers like Walter Scott and Balzac, and thought that they were – despite initial appearances – far more "revolutionary" than the newer writers
- He accused modernists of neglect of objective reality, of dwelling in subjective immediate experience
- He saw art's purpose as confronting an objective reality that exists in the world: for him, capitalism was "an objective totality of social relations," and it was realism that could unmask this
- By "totality" he meant that capitalism is utterly pervasive – so much so that we can't see it at all, and it seems to function independently of our awareness of it
- He posited this dialectical relationship between appearance and essence: we experience life as subjective, and events seems to be **not** socially-

determined, but that is mere “appearance”; the “essence” of things is in their having been determined by the objective totality of capitalism

- In modernism, he thought, reality is depicted only as it appears to authors and characters; there is no effort to see the whole, so modernist authors fail to “pierce the surface” of subjective life “to discover the underlying essence” or hidden social forces that produce subjective lives
- You might think of money, which is an abstraction that stands in for certain real social relationships. Where does it come from? How does it operate? What does it represent? Or think of commodity fetishism. Commodities appear to contain all their meaning as we immediately experience them (this is a shirt, I’m going to wear it; it looks nice on me), but to experience a shirt this way (which is what capitalism “wants” us to do) is to strip this shirt from its “essential” contextual meaning (which, because Lukács was a Marxist, means how it relates to a broader capitalist system of production)
- Writers **should** use their minds, he says, to find and uncover the objective realities; and should use their skills to lend artistic shape to reality through fictions of subjectivity
- Masterpieces of realism are always “wholes” for him; they depict a wide-ranging and exhaustive objective reality like the one that exists in the non-fictional world.
- Writing has a political / social mission to show people that their experiences only **seem** immediate. In reality, they are influenced by the objective totality of capitalism. Modernists fail at this, focusing too much on immediate, subjective, abstract experience...

### Questions to think about

1. What are the limitations of this kind of thinking?
2. Do writers have this kind of social responsibility, in your view?
3. Can anyone be trusted to discover, perceive and represent the “totality”?
4. Is Mistry a realist, in Lukács’ terms? How is he and how isn’t he? Is the experience of the characters too fragmented and dispersed for any “whole” to emerge? Do you have any sense of an overarching narrative presence?