

Panel 25
Intermediality, Aesthetics and Transformation

‘You Have It but You Don’t Have It’: Ben Lerner’s Oscillatory Aesthetics

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Focalised through poet-novelist protagonists grappling with a post-critical aesthetic and political landscape, Ben Lerner’s autofictional novels *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2013), *10:04* (2015) and *The Topeka School* (2019) stage the crisis and persistence of radicality in Western art under contemporary neoliberalism. Lerner’s prosimetrum prose project has been read as an exploration in the poetics of virtuality that moves beyond mere presence and gestures to the possibility of art outside the logic of capital, of an art to come. This paper aims to further develop the political aesthetics of virtuality in these novels by situating them within the oscillatory frameworks of metamodernism and autofiction. Drawing on theorists such as Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Jason Ānanda Storm, and on Lerner’s other works such as *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), this paper argues that the oscillation between irony and sincerity, fiction and reality, and political disillusionment and utopian longing in the texts foreground the ambivalent space of virtual potentiality as a viable site for radical contemporary aesthetics. It considers the formal architecture of the two novels and the representational strategies deployed by Lerner (fragmented poetics and metafictional play) as experiments in both novelistic and autobiographical form that neither wholly embrace postmodern skepticism nor return uncritically to modernist ideals. Central to this reading is the virgule, which operates as a syntactic and conceptual marker of virtuality. Lastly, it considers the texts as ethical interventions that ask us to rethink the social efficacy of public utterances such as poetry.

Biography

Tushar Rishi is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His research focuses on the intersection of form and literary thought in J.M. Coetzee’s late novels. His novel *The Patient Patient* (2016) was shortlisted for Best Debut English Novel 2016 at PILF Pune.