



BOOK FORUM

Peripheral Convergences

Maria Elisa Cevasco 

University of São Paulo, Brazil

Email: maece@usp.br

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When I sat down to write these brief notes on *Insurgent Imaginations*, my first temptation was to juxtapose its project for world literature to liberal accounts. But this would only prove what readers of books like this already know, that is, the abysmal difference in relevance between Marxist and liberal discussions of the subject. The latter tend to be marked by the notion that world literature has transformed the globalized supermarket of written works of art into an Amazon, in which we can comfortably access cultural artifacts from the Aztecs to the Sumerians, and then consume them as an isolated experience. Rather than praising difference and variety, which do not relate, the effort here is to formulate the usefulness of the new discipline for a project of social transformation. Indeed, “the point is to change it.” To further this historical task, the book sets out to demonstrate the critical and political possibilities available to a reading of world literature from a peripheral point of view.

This demonstration is carried out in constant dialogue with the Marxist tradition. To use a term coined by Fredric Jameson, the book presents an exercise in “cognitive mapping,” a way of doing what globalized capital denies, that is the possibility of coordinating local cultural productions with national or international ones, thus enabling perception of the totality that rules them all. This is accomplished by way of the invention of categories that guide the analysis of cultural products in such a way as to render visible structures of the specific conjunctures that frame them. As such, it is yet another example of the ways in which cultural materialism is a position that turn analysis into an instrument for discovering and interpreting social reality, to adapt Antonio Candido’s apt phrase.¹ The aim is to contribute to turn world literature into a strategy of resistance. The result, once more, confirms that Marxism is the untranscendable horizon of productive thought. There is no point, then, in wasting time with comparisons with other approaches.

¹ Antonio Candido, *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* ([1957]; Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2006), 429.

And what does the new discipline look like when seen through materialist lenses? What first struck me was the way the book reshapes the main tenets of the academic debate on world literature, redefining not only what the discipline should study, but also, and crucially, proposing a way of “reading” cultural production, that gives continuity to a productive Marxist tradition, and is, to my mind, the key contribution the book makes for the debate, very much including the debate on the left. The main object of study of this counter-hegemonic version of world literature is peripheral cultural production examined horizontally, that is, in relation to other peripheral productions. This is one of the senses in which peripheral internationalism provides a framework to put into dialogue productions that resist dominant modes in specific but related ways. The narrative of their forms of resistance—be it in the cinema of Glauber Rocha, in the reportage of Arundhati Roy or the biography of M. N. Roy—illuminates the constitutive relationship between local, or even grassroots, artistic productions and the national or international organization of capital that shapes and limits their power of representation and revelation.

This is made possible by a conception of the periphery in line with the Wallerstein/Moretti assertion that we live in a world that is at the same time one and unequal. As it is well known, Moretti, a central figure in the debate on the left, sets out to find the similarities in the inequalities and draws general principles that enable him to see world literature as a system, but as a system of variations, that is, “the system is one, but it is not uniform.”² It is, however, a system subject to certain laws that get repeated in different circumstances. Moretti tries to discover those laws using an approach he calls distant reading.

Rather than looking to establish laws that “get repeated in different circumstances,” Majumder draws productively on another Marxist tradition, which is generally associated with the Austro-Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz. In yet another example of horizontal readings, he presents Roberto’s³ theory as one of the conditions of possibility of the kind of world literature proposed in the book. Of the many contributions that it makes to Majumder’s argument, two seem to be pivotal: the refunctioning of the category of the periphery and the notion of objective form, which entails a way of reading, that is, for me, the most productive contribution the book makes to the debate on world literature.

What is so special about what I am calling here the refunctioning of the category of the periphery? Let me begin by quickly recapping the situation that gave rise to the new notion. It all began as a small group of professors from different disciplines in the humanities and two or three students got together to read Marx at the University of São Paulo in the late 1950s. One of their key problems as Marxists was to understand the social and historical context that determined their intellectual production. In the process they forged an original way of conceptualizing Brazilian positionality in the world. Both the right and the communist left thought of the country as being one stage behind the “international,” in their conception, Western European and North American

² Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 66.

³ In calling Schwarz by his first name, I follow Brazilian usage. We all call him Roberto, not Schwarz.

norms of development. This gave rise to a series of misplaced notions and political mistakes—to give just two examples of the most glaring ones, the idea of Brazil as the country of the future, which forever required one more effort to catch up with so-called developed countries, and the idea that we needed to go through all the stages of European development before we could embark in more radical change. Both right and left shared an uncritical view of the desirability of progress, which prevented them from asking the fundamental questions of progress: For whom and at what cost? Most of the intellectual efforts to define the specificity of the country was keyed on comparison with the center.

This group took another path and, following Trotsky's lead, conceived the country as functioning, or rather malfunctioning, under the laws of combined and uneven development. This allowed them to achieve what Roberto calls a powerful "new intuition of the country,"⁴ which was central to their respective works. In Roberto's own formulation, this was a generation for whom it became clear that it was fruitless to try to conceive of the peculiarities of the country outside a contemporary system of relations. Contrary to received wisdom, the social deviancy of Brazil should not be seen as an anomaly or as a result of simple backwardness but as an integral part of the world system whose notion of progress the very existence of places like Brazil qualifies. This viewpoint enabled this generation to explore the structural links between our discrepancies and the dynamics of international capital. This adds a new potency to their intellectual output insofar as their work illuminates both the local and the international situations.

Majumder takes on from there and shows how the conceptual ground provided by Roberto enables him to formulate a peripheral aesthetics, which does not ignore "the particular histories of the societies and of the literatures these engender." Instead of focusing on a selective canon of postcolonial texts, with little attention to context, "this entails a rigorously historicized examination of diverse national literary traditions, their mediated autonomies, and their interconnectedness." Furthermore, instead of viewing texts and contexts as unique or culturally irreducible, they are properly seen as "interlinked instantiations of a literary world-system shaped by 'capital and its advances,' and articulating the specific limit-conditions for the abolition of the latter" (26).

This position questions the explanatory power of a number of notions that have shaped discussions on world literature, including the ones on the left. Categories such as Eurocentrism, cultural imperialism, and colonial rationality, though useful to describe one end of the process of international cultural relations, fail to see the interconstitutive nature of those relations, which are defined by the structures imposed by capitalism. Drawing on Andre Gunther Frank, Majumder concludes that "the question of ideational dominance of the metropolitan cores over the semi-peripheries and peripheries should be approached in the context of structural imbalances and capacities, supply and demand of the international division of labor. The periphery is a relational entity

⁴ Roberto Schwarz, "Um Seminário de Marx," *Sequências Brasileiras* (São Paulo: Cia das Letras, 1999), 93.

based, in the final instance, on appropriated labor” (27). That of course is cultural *materialism* at its most useful.

Now to objective form. Majumder reminds his readers that “Schwarz—and his theory of objective form—belongs to a tradition of criticism that includes his teacher at the University of São Paulo, Antonio Candido, as much as the key figures of interwar Marxism, Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno” (23). It is also by making this notion the basis of his way of reading peripheral works of art that he gives continuity to the tradition of Western Marxism. In the process, he demonstrates its relevance to the demands of the present. In an essay in which he discusses Antonio Candido’s theoretical take on aesthetic form, Roberto writes: “The defining concern of Marxist criticism of literature is the dialectic of form and social process. This watch word is easily uttered but difficult to act upon.”⁵ In the essay, Roberto shows how Candido inaugurates this dialectical way of reading in Brazil. Using the latter’s unassuming formulation, the key to the process is to be found in analyzing how the external, that is, aspects of social historical reality, becomes internal, that is, substantiates the structuring of the work. In a later essay significantly entitled “National Adequacy and Critical Originality,” Roberto argues that Candido’s originality as a thinker is a function of his adequacy to the social reality it is the task of the cultural critic to reveal and interpret. We learn from Roberto that the strength of Candido’s way of reading lies in his drawing the consequences of the Marxist notion that “The material constraints of social reproduction are in themselves basic forms which mark different areas of intellectual and artistic productions, where they circulate and are re-elaborated, in more or less falsified or sublimated forms. In artistic production every form has a reference in social reality. It materializes the complex heterogeneity of social-historical relations. Historicity is not a background, but the very substance of artistic form.”⁶ The task of criticism is to decipher the specific ways in which, in every artistic work, what we have is “forms working on forms.”

Franco Moretti succinctly states the difference this approach makes to any reading, and very much to the reading of world literature: form “functions like a ‘structural reduction’ (Candido), or an ‘abstract’ (Schwarz) of existing social relations: a synthesis that makes it possible to intuitively grasp the social whole, and hence also to judge it.” For Moretti, “A similar combination of truthfulness, stylization and critique emerges from other Marxist interpretations of high bourgeois art: Benjamin on Baudelaire, for instance, and Oehler on Heine and Flaubert; Adorno on Schönberg, or T. J. Clark on Manet.”⁷

The awareness of this lineage seems to me to be a welcome difference in Majumder’s approach to world literature. In order to illustrate this difference, I want to end by making a few cursory remarks on his reading of Aravind Adiga’s debut novel, *White Tiger*. Majumder is a scholar of Indian studies, and though the book brings in analysis of a number of non-Indian productions, he closes the discussion with this recent novel, set in India and very much providing a

⁵ Roberto Schwarz, “Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectics of Roguery,” *Two Girls and a Master*, ed. Francis Mulhern (London: Verso, 2012), 10.

⁶ Schwarz, “Adequação Nacional e Originalidade Crítica,” *Sequências Brasileiras*, 23; my translation.

⁷ Franco Moretti, “The End of the Beginning,” *New Left Review* 41 (2006): 86.

verification that you can do world literature from home, so to speak. His way of reading the novel shows, to go back to *Candido*, how the external—the socio-historic “novelties” of the present conjuncture—becomes internal and structures the form of the novel. In the process, as argued in the discussion of the theory that grounds his practice, we acquire new knowledge on the current situation.

Majumder’s choice of object is astute. It puts in motion a cluster of the main points he makes in the construction of a peripheral aesthetics. To start with the obvious, the novel in India is an imported form, and, in the case of the Anglophone novel, the importation includes the use of language: imported form, imported language, and, of course, imported ideas that both fit and don’t fit the social life in India, with its own share of internal combined and uneven development. The novel comprises a series of letters that the protagonist, Balram Halwai, writes to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, who is about to visit India. As he tells his trajectory to the foreign leader, we get a narrative of social ascension. If, in its European beginnings, the genre told the story of an individual in conflict with society, here we have a tale of conformity to the norms. No rebellion for our present-day Rastignac. He is fully aware that his humble rural origins place him very much outside the benefits and opportunities reserved to the upper layers. Though not a bourgeois, Halwai believes in the mythos of the self-made man and makes all the efforts to succeed, against all odds, turning his life into an allegory of international neoliberal ideological stories of meritocracy. We learn how he manages to leave the poverty of village life to become a driver for the son of his family’s landlord, and from there, to found a driver’s company, which he proudly manages. He incarnates the dream of the globalized peripheral middle class, while, like so many others, he organizes life according to a pattern that is structured to turn even relatively successful people like our narrator into outsiders. As such, he also represents the typical peripheral delusion that if one makes the effort, one can join in the club of the privileged. Majumder calls our attention to the fact that the language he uses functions as domination. He quotes the revealing first sentence of the text, when, addressing the Chinese premier, he says “*Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.*” English, he notes, “is not one language among many, but the meta-language of dominant though not absolute determination” (188). It is a language that “speaks us” and works to limit the horizon of our thoughts.

It is in the conscious or unconscious structuring of the complex relationship the novel establishes with this hegemonic order that the book reveals much more than the plot seems to imply. The formal choice of a first-person narrator in “communication” with an official figure grants the novelist the opportunity of exposing the subjectivity of the sly narrator. His success, as he candidly explains to his imagined reader Jaobao, and to us, the real readers, is based on robbing and assassinating his employer. This is yet another contemporary example of accumulation by violent dispossession, demonstrating that no price is too high to achieve success in a world ruled by capital. Halwai is a revealing incarnation of the subjectivity such a system generates. In this sense, he is a typical hero of the world system, one that embodies the true movement of history, to speak like Lukács.

For Majumder, a number of specificities of the contemporary development of late capitalism in the so-called New India are also rendered visible by the presence of a few ghosts that haunt the story. One of the most interesting is the failure to suppress the Naxalite movement: he reads Halway's repeated and "vociferous" denial of any connection to the Naxalites as "the most symptomatic element of the text," one that tries to suppress the presence of organized revolt in the tales of the country's success. The attempt works out only in a superficial reading that does not take into account the unreliability of the narrator and does not see that the denied presence of the Naxalites is perceived by all the rural characters in the novel, both the landlords and Halwai's family. The narrator's denials imitate the current social effort to domesticate dissidence at the plane of ideas, one of the social and political strategies to turn legitimate struggles over surplus into "piecemeal rights for the oppressed" and "apologetics for liberal justice." The force of the material is such that the novel goes against the professed ideology of the author—Adiga claims that people are not interested in class struggle.⁸ When read through the lenses of the peripheral aesthetics proposed in the book, however, the novel ends up by presenting a critique of the most widespread of the strategies of containment, used in various parts of the globalized world to manage and defuse current demands for equality and distribution. "Through containment and recoding, the trenchantly anti-humanist narrator of *The White Tiger* replicates the real-life humanitarian model of transnational NGOs" (175). In the same move, we readers can experience the human cost of being indifferent to the invisible many, be it in our cynical narrator or in the ones who advocate palliatives to the appalling inequality of our world.

The interpretation of the novel, according to the tenets of the peripheral aesthetics outlined in the book, makes it possible for Majumder to point out the ways in which capitalist progress continues to create backwardness in the new periphery. In the current version of the Old World order, exploitation and reification continue to rule. One of the achievements of *Insurgent Imaginations* is to demonstrate the difference theories argued in the book make to relevant reading. In the process it shows that another world literature is possible. This makes it stimulating reading for people like me, who gladly accept the label "partisan critics" and want to turn the new discipline into yet one more weapon in the humanist emancipatory struggle.

Author biography. Maria Elisa Cevalco is Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Her main research interests include materialist cultural criticism and contemporary fiction, and her books include *Para Ler Raymond Williams* (Paz e Terra, 2001), and its Spanish translation, *Para Leer a Raymond Williams* (Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Ediciones, 2003), *Dez Lições de Estudos Culturais* (Editora Boitempo, 2003), and its Spanish translation, *Diez Lecciones sobre Estudios Culturales* (La Marca Editora, 2013).

⁸ Majumder quotes an interview Adiga gave to *The Guardian* in which he claims that "class is a boring topic to write about"; see page 175.

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