Warwick Research Collective (Sharae Deckard, Nicolas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Mac Donald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Stephen Shapiro, and Benita Parry), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*

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REFERENCES

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- 1 “The periphery is where the future reveals itself” (J. G. Ballard). The epigraph to this impressive new work by the Warwick Research Collective encapsulates the project’s alternative and somewhat idealistic spirit. Such a statement gestures towards revelatory ends and justifies a method relying on Marxist class struggle theory. Yet, giving voice to what is excluded from the center is reminiscent of the projects of both subaltern and postcolonial studies, with which the present book shares similar topological tropes (one needs only think of Bhabha’s handling of the margins and the

interstitial space). According to the authors, the center is obsolete as signifier, and the periphery has become the locale where unbearable tensions give birth to new, other and more complex representations. *Combined and Uneven Development, Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* tries to “grasp world-literature as the literary registration of modernity under the sign of [Trotsky’s] combined and uneven development” (17). The book opens on two theoretical chapters: “World-literature in the context of combined and uneven development,” which articulately identifies the intellectual sources of the ongoing debate about globalization and culture, and “The question of peripheral realism,” which delves deeper into the literary implications of an analysis focused on uneven development. Then follows a series of four case studies which successfully put the arguments to the test, with texts by Tayeb Salih (Sudan), Victor Pelevin (Russia), Peter Pist’aneek (Slovakia) and Ivan Vladislavic (South Africa).

- 2 Marxism provides a refreshing and startlingly convincing critical perspective on two approaches that hold center stage in contemporary criticism: global literature, seen as an extension of postcolonial studies, and world-literature, defined as “what happens when comparative literature goes global” (5). Despite obvious common goals, the authors repudiate postcolonial studies because, they argue, the “post” emphasizes incommensurability and difference, and therefore eschews antagonism. Edward Said’s work is taken to task as the collective demonstrates that capitalism is not only political and cultural, but also material: to neglect this, according to them, tends to equate the West with capitalism, which is deemed unacceptable since capitalism and modernity are all-encompassing and global processes. Similarly, comparatism has lived because it remains blind to power relations and inequality: comparatists, they lament, as they develop a strong case against Emily Apter, reduce knowledge to linguistic knowledge, by considering language as neutral and all languages as equal.
- 3 The book purports to resituate the problem of world literature by “pursuing the literary cultural implications of [Trotsky’s] theory of combined and uneven development” (6), in the manner of the recent work on world literature by Pascale Casanova, who defines it as a system based on inequality; it is also a line developed by the seminal Marxist works of Theodor Adorno or Fredric Jameson, the latter suggesting that class-based relations often appear more vividly in the peripheries of the world system. The volume relies on two concepts: “semi-periphery” and “irrealism.” The former is borrowed from Franco Moretti, who defines it as the place where inequality is most vivid, not because it is outside or on the edge, but because “it has been incorporated within that system precisely as peripheral” (124). The latter refers to the formal feature that best defines this peripheral world-literature, characterized by non-synchronism and combined symbolic forms originating from disparate places. Drawing on Marxist theorist Michael Löwy’s notion of irreality, the authors postulate that “an elective affinity exists between the general situations of peripherality and irrealist aesthetics” (68), and claim insistently that there is a mimetic correlation between historical context and formal rendering. This equation can be considered as the blind spot of such a method, as it always runs the risk of overvaluing political pressures in the field of art. As a case in point, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is defined as the ideal-type of the modern irrealist epic where an isolated community is “caught up in the modern world system, which subjects it to an unexpected, violent acceleration” (54), justifying the postulate according to which irrealism arises in periods when “all that is solid melts into air” (73). By focusing on so-called unorthodox works throughout the

ages and the globe (the corpus includes Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, André Breton, Elfrida Jelinek and Ngugi wa Thiong'o), the authors provide a convincing incentive to think beyond modernism, and to anchor criticism in history rather than in abstract universals. This counters David Damrosch's prominent thesis on world-literature, which he defines as a mode of reading, an engagement with the world beyond our own place and time, as well as an elliptical refraction of national literature. Alternatively, they highlight hierarchy and the struggle for power characteristic of the modern capitalist world running from the 19th century onward. The key issue of capitalistic development is best described as this process which "takes the form also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development" (13), explaining why works from Iceland, Brazil, Spain or South Africa resonate so well with the general thesis. As a matter of fact, the last chapter devoted to Ivan Vladislavic's depictions of Johannesburg is particularly engaging: the writing is concerned with the very material discrepancies that capitalist development entails in a semi-periphery, of which the South African city becomes the epitome. The book is indeed at its best when it grasps world-literature as a mode of resistance to capitalist modernization, in short a creature of modernity, part of the capitalist world system as a whole. Yet, this sweeping claim could be nuanced by taking into account the huge body of work already devoted to magic realism and to postmodernist formal recuperations and innovations, like historiographic metafiction; such inclusions would modulate the authors' claim to newness, a slightly excessive one.

- 4 This work presents the rare quality of navigating through an extremely large corpus of primary and secondary sources, thus providing an illuminating synthesis to whoever wants to enter the current debates surrounding globalization and culture. The homogeneous quality of the collective leaves no room for redundancy and creates a complex argument, richly layered with the multiple sources and currents of thoughts available today. The lack of individual signatures makes it a truly collective work, as if performing a common refusal to submit to the individualistic ethos of the modern liberal world.

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Cécile GIRARDIN is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Paris 13. Her research focuses on postcolonial literature and theory, especially from South Asia. She has published articles and edited collections on the political dimension of contemporary literature in the works of Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Hari Kunzru, Mohsin Hamid and Amitav Ghosh.