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**Dialectical Criticism in the Provinces of the “World Republic of Letters”: the Primacy of the Object in the Work of Roberto Schwarz**

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Das Ganze ist das Unwahre  
—T.W. Adorno

A mística terceiro-mundista encobre o conflito de classes e traz na visão ingênua, ainda que violenta, dos antagonismos e sobretudo das interdependências internacionais. A estética que ela inspira existe, e é a herdeira dos aspectos retrogrades do nacionalismo. Para relativizar a questão, por outro lado, convém lembrar também que inexistente a estética do primeiro mundo.

—Roberto Schwarz

Nowadays, it has become almost impossible to sit down and write anything sensible about aesthetics and globalization without immediately entering into a pre-defined order of clichés about the unprecedented compression of time and space reflected in the intensification of social, political, economic, and cultural

interconnections of today's world. Literary theory has not been immune to the pressures to rise up to the challenge of the discourses on globalization, producing in turn different attempts to apprehend, comprehend and theorize its object in step with the dominant ideology of the time. Critics like Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova have embarked on ambitious projects in search of establishing new paradigms that re-create a globalist literary discourse and a systematic apparatus that can render a literary world comprehensible. While the intent and matrices of this new "worlding" of literature may be different in conception, the critical-historical impetus behind them is a shared one: to take distance from the discourse of postcolonial studies and to reinstate models of a global understanding of literary production that have in the long run a depoliticizing effect, be this achieved through the adoption of an empirical Darwinian model of the evolution of literary forms or through the redeployment of the concept of literary autonomy, this time with all the clocks set to the Greenwich Meridian.

For the Latin American critic, the constant replay of Eurocentric all-encompassing phenomenological campaigns of re-worlding literature, become in their tedium quite interesting, as they always unfailingly signal the erasure of Marxism as the critical theoretical apparatus that put at the center of knowledge construction a metacritique of epistemology, thereby setting a radically different framework for the analysis of culture and reification in late capitalism. In the pages that follow, after reviewing some of these attempts at a logic of "third world" literary production, I will present the work of the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, whose immanent critical theoretical protocols, rigorously take us to the basic principle of modern Marxian/Adornian aesthetics: that of the primacy of the object. This kind of work provides a different answer to the perennial problems of external models of analysis versus text-based interpretations, of levels of particularity in literature versus extrapolating general models, as well as more specifically addressing how is that foreign aesthetic ideas and forms are always affirmed improperly in the peripheral context, thereby ciphering according to a law of their own the truth of the social world.

*I. Das Ganze ist das Unwahre: on the limits of the category of "Third World Literature"*

Historically, let's not begin this review with Goethe's concept of

*Weltliteratur* or with the one sentence in the *Communist Manifesto* where world literature makes its appearance. Instead, let's situate this discussion within the institutionalized framework of the Anglophone academy since this is a problem that pertains exclusively to the discursive formations of that location and involves actors defined by those institutional demands. For this reason let's go back to the old and exhausted debate that took place almost twenty five years ago between Fredric Jameson and Ajaz Ahmad; a debate that at that juncture in the Anglophone academy, and assessed now in retrospect, seems to have had more to do with the need for a justification for the emerging field of postcolonial literatures and for the legitimation of the space and rubric of "World Literature" in English departments, than with any preoccupation with the attributed structural allegorical capacity of "third world" literatures. It is worth remembering and resituating the legacy of this debate, now that both the discourses of globalization and of the bio-concept of "empire" seem to fold all cultural problematics into themselves. While the Jameson-Ahmad debate in itself is no longer at stake, the fundamental dynamic of that debate, its consequences and the preoccupation with the global character of cultural analysis return to occupy again center stage. In other words, the current articulation of this problem in the models of Moretti and Casanova is really only a continuation of the same epistemic enterprise, this time stripped of the political imaginary of the Bandung era, but now recast under the wider semiotic apparatus of a globalized world.

From that original debate we learned of the theoretical poverty of terms like "third world", of the impossibility of posing at such a level of generality the problems that delimit the study of literature—such as those of social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production, contested cultural institutional contexts and periodization models—and learned of the highly contradictory experience of non-metropolitan intellectuals and how precise one had to be when studying the way in which these writers entered into commerce with the institutions of culture in their own contexts. What would constitute a differential study of culture in modernity could not follow Fredric Jameson's proposal of the study of "third-world" literature in the era of multinational capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Among the most serious objections that were posed to Jameson then were the generalizations regarding the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> See also "A brief response," *Social Text* 17 (1987): 26-27.

nationalism and the “necessarily allegorical character” that he attributed to those literatures. Aijaz Ahmad in his well-known reply to Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” pointed out that the term “third world” had no theoretical status whatsoever, nor did it have an epistemological foundation, but also that the attempt at formulating it is empirically ungrounded. Ahmad asked at that point, how one would classify countries like India or Brazil, given their level of capitalist economic activity? What would the empirical criteria for classification be? These questions become even more valid now in the era of “advanced” and “emerging” economies that have complicated, even more the use of the term “third world.”

In light of the merely empirical problems for such classification Jameson’s recourse to the experience of colonialism and imperialism as the basis for setting up this division seemed also insufficient. To discern from the general experience of colonialism a general trend of nationalist responses seemed only to trivialize the problem of nationalism in peripheral contexts in an axiomatic fashion. Jameson’s general assumptions about nationalism led him to pose allegory as a main form of cultural expression in the “third world”. As Ahmad pointedly noted, this could only be sustained if no inquiry were made into the way writers enter into commerce with the institutions of culture in a peripheral context. The actual experience of “third world” intellectuals in highly contradictory societies may actually inhibit any kind of capacity for allegorizing and exhibit a more profound experience of alienation and desolation than any of their postmodern counterparts in the “first world.”<sup>2</sup>

Between China and Africa, Latin America danced in and out with great unease in Jameson’s text, an uneasiness that was symptomatic of precisely the historical *differences* from the Chinese and African examples that Jameson discussed. These were differences based on the *national* configurations in which Latin American literature had been produced. It seemed clear that the nation, as empty coeval form and as sociopolitical reality, remained the locus of the inscription of the institution of literature. While the political claim of comparativism made itself evident in the urge to globalize the understanding of this literature in an effort to deprovincialize the metropolitan reader, the effect of

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<sup>2</sup> According to Schwarz, Machado de Assis’s literary production points to this increased awareness of cultural contradiction between the liberal ideas of a political elite and the slavery-based economy in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Brazil.

allochronic distancing was unavoidable in a text that divided the world into three different ones. Perhaps, the most significant consequence of the result of this spatialization of time was the production of a sovereign metropolitan reader in the unending quest for doing justice, in political terms, to his/her reading of these literary objects, always from the vantage point of his/her own construction of them.

An alternative at that point would have been to explain the current diversification process through the study of national cultures under conditions of modernity. The basic premise of that undertaking is the assumption of the coevalness of cultural processes under global capitalism. Modern cultures are neither “belated” nor “underdeveloped”; neither are they to be assumed as a priori belligerent, revolutionary, or admirable utopian loci. Their own specificity can be found in the historical experience of modern capitalism and in their specific colonial histories. The presence of certain forms of writing in different cultural contexts does not depend on the quality of the shared experience of the writers but rather these forms vary in direct relation to the institutionalized traditions and conventions of their contexts. Writers choose forms depending on the social and historical circumstances that define the institutional space from which they produce.

It is clear that any attempt to theorize globally about literary production in terms of the “third world” have been, at best and so far, a failed promise. However, Jameson’s claim about the preoccupation with nationalism in the “third world” deserved in its moment important consideration because the history of its theorization provided a good example of how the logic of difference had been inscribed in world historical terms. In other words, the very conditions of possibility of such a dichotomy can be found in the historical treatment of the problem of nation formation and nationalism available to us since the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

Against Jameson’s hypostatizing of “third world” Literatures” and in spite of the strategic claims that such a rubric may have had on the politics of the American

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<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the different theories of nationalism that would prove this point is beyond the scope of this essay. One can, however, point to important debates of the past twenty years. The work of Benedict Anderson, for example, questions previously held assumptions about the origin of nationalism, and as consequence puts into question the developmental logic that has characterized the thinking of nationalism in metropolitan centers in the past.

academy, the task of articulating a project of the study of national cultures under modernity remains crucial for Latin American intellectuals. This kind of project would permit a negation of the logic of alterity that makes the cultural products of “lesser developed regions of the world” *necessarily* this or that (i.e., allegorical readings of the nation, anti-canonical, revolutionary, anti-representational, emergent, etc.), and would confront the provincial understanding of modernity supporting these schemas of classification.<sup>4</sup>

The coevalness of modernity as experienced in the globalization of monopoly capitalism from the end of the nineteenth century on poses the challenge of a differential theory of modernity that can account for the status of cultural production under conditions of modernity in the periphery of the industrialized world. It is only through these comparative and differential understandings that European cultural modernity can be shown to be the exception rather than the rule in the global context. As far as the political repercussions of such a stance, it would prove to be far more radical than the ghettoization of diversity in the American university where through the visible marking of gender and race a different form of knowledge is institutionalized. This difference and its current recognition through classifications like “Third World Literature” (as just one example) reinscribe the racism of alterity politics. It is perhaps the fear of places and peoples all too contemporary and coeval, the disavowal of global capital relations, and the denial of the minority status of “first world” culture that prevents a different kind of politics in the institutionalization of new ways of understanding modern cultural developments on a global scale.

The institutionalization of the study of “Third World Literatures” in the United States says more about the status of the institution of literature in this part of the globe than about the cultural processes of those countries considered under the rubric “third world.” The rapid and intensified process of sanctioning and

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<sup>4</sup> The genealogy of how this has been attempted in the Latin American tradition is the subject of a different chapter in this project and cannot be engaged here. In that chapter the ideological battles for an anticolonial approximation to the problem of cultural production and its analysis reveal also the tensions between the Marxist tradition and alternative decolonizing intellectual models proposed by thinkers as different as Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano. That chapter proposes a matrix of interpretation that requires an operational category of modernity, that follows the historical semantic model of Reinhart Koselleck who conceives of it as category of historical periodization, as a quality of social experience, and as an incomplete project, its historical semantic limits and its inseparability from the uneven and combined relations to European modernity, and by extension of the working of capital.

canonizing cultural products from other parts of the world preempts the possibility of posing important questions about the “rest of the world” in a more radical way. By this I mean questions that would illuminate the coeval economic, cultural and political processes of modernity and the relation between these processes, rather than remaining at the level of the construction of their otherness and thereby reaffirming European notions of culture and modernity precisely through gestures of inclusion.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The “worlding” of literature: trees, maps and the World Republic of Letters

Twenty years later we find ourselves in the midst of a new effort to theorize the literary field as one global phenomenon. Moretti, in his book *The Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*<sup>6</sup> and Casanova, in her book *The World Republic Of Letters* propose new structures of interaction between literature and history to try to answer questions that have been posed before: is it possible to find the conceptual means to restore the link between literature, history and the world without losing the specificity and irreducible particularity of texts? Can we avail ourselves of theoretical tools to combat the arbitrary principle of the autonomy of literary texts? What are the laws that govern the multiplicity of literary forms? Given the fact that the questions have already been posed before, answered and debated from various theoretical vantage points, the more puzzling question is: why are they being posed again? What answers to these questions were never heard and why not? I’ll speculate on these questions a bit later on.

While these attempts may not confront the same difficulties of Jameson’s proposal, they present new, and perhaps, more insurmountable problems than

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<sup>5</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. To what degree that problematic relationship between the conceptualizing of the center vis-à-vis the object of the periphery can escape a constitutive racism is, perhaps, a question worthy of another discussion but must be brought up here briefly. Could it be, as Zizek maintains, that “postmodern racism is the symptom of multiculturalist late capitalism, bringing light to the inherited contradiction of the liberal democratic ideological project and without the element of the real *jouissance*, the Other remains ultimately a fiction, a purely symbolic subject of strategic reasoning exemplified in rational choice theory?” (27). For that reason, he maintains in a provocative fashion, that one is even tempted to replace the term multiculturalism with multiracism: multiculturalism suspends the traumatic kernel of the Other, reducing it to an aseptic folklorist entity. Zizek’s critique about the impossibility of a non-traumatic relationship to the Other is something that must be somehow taken into account when reflecting upon the sites of knowledge production.

<sup>6</sup> Moretti’s project is extensive and I will refer here only to the book on the modern epic and to *Maps, Graphs, Trees*.

Jameson's effort at schematizing the totality of "third world literatures." Franco Moretti proposes a comparative global study of the form of the novel, through the systematic analysis of a phenomenal accumulation of empirical studies from all over the world. At stake is a historical account of how genres have evolved in time and space. This is an evolutionary model, in a strict Darwinian-Gouldian sense that tries to account for the fact that certain literary forms have succeeded while other competing literary possibilities have perished. What laws govern the selection process and how these laws work when the novel-form travels and changes its morphology are questions that Moretti tries to answer through the analysis of empirical data gathered from around the globe. At stake is an empirical model for the understanding of a global literary history that examines a vast amount of material now lost to literary historians. Moretti conceptualizes his project, as one that seeks to elucidate a law of literary evolution taking into consideration a vast sample of novels: central to his theoretical framework is the fate of the novel outside Europe and what it tells us about that form. In this model all novels outside Europe result from the encounter of particular social realities that when expressed in a Western form that doesn't quite fit that reality, end up generating variations of the European form. This is an interesting thesis based on a notion of *Weltliteratur* that avoids the allochronic deficit of other positions (like Jameson's), but the obvious question becomes, if one may be allowed to be so blunt, what else would the encounter of particular European forms with non-European realities yield? What else would all dialectical interactions between global forms and local realities produce? Moretti's conclusions ought to serve here as a premise for the study of the actual mediations between form and social reality and not as its outcome. His recourse to the language from the natural and social sciences for his theoretical construction forces him to submit his theory to a vocabulary and a set of protocols that by definition entangle it in the all the biases, contradictions, and consequences related to its metaphorical construction.

In his introduction to *Graphs, Maps, Trees* Moretti explains that through this trio of artificial constructs the reality of the text undergoes a process of abstraction that allows for the production of "a specific form of knowledge." The epistemic claim here is one that he attributes to his Marxist formation: "the distant reason for this choice lies in my Marxist formation, which was profoundly influenced by Galvano Della Volpe and entailed therefore (in principle, if not



always in practice) a great respect for the scientific spirit” (Moretti 20). The appeal to a positivistic Marxism, as if the relevant Marxist conversations on the critique of positivism had never happened, as if Adorno and Popper had never engaged in debate on the future of sociology (and is Moretti’s project, once stripped of its Darwinian attire, not a global project in the sociology of literary forms?) brings to the fore the question of the affinities between the return to positivism and the current discourses on globalization. What is really achieved through the massive accumulation of data on a traveling form? What does this conceptual apparatus, when appealing to a conceptual unification taken from the sciences hide? This model imposes “a regime of visibility”<sup>7</sup> that hides the fundamental contradiction of class conflict in a world that is not one, certainly not one that can serve as a map through which forms travel without facing the fundamental contradictions of disparaging inequalities, war and injustice; or in Adorno’s words: “an ideal conceptual unification taken from the natural sciences cannot, however indiscriminately, be applied to a society whose unity resides in not being unified” (Adorno 52).

Let’s take just one example from Moretti’s account of the evolution of the Latin American novel. It is no surprise that his model yields eventually someone like García Márquez, who emerges in his *Modern Epic*<sup>8</sup> as valiant hero when the gloomy European novel has run itself into the ground. From that moment on, he contends, the “Macondo species” forces us to see the epic no longer from the core of the world system but from the periphery (243), but does it really? Any student of Latin American literature knows that Moretti’s portrayal of García Márquez is a presentation of the Boom’s self-understanding, which hides the contestation around the aesthetics of “magical realism,” the international market niche in the late sixties produced and at the same time satisfied the Spanish book industry by creating an editorial phenomenon that brought to international recognition a literature which at that time was not as widely consumed. All of this has little to do with understanding the refunctionalization of the novel by a generation of professional Latin American writers that were the first to be able to live from writing fiction. These novels rather than being the naturally selected species to

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<sup>7</sup> I take this concept from Jacques Rancière, who first develops it in *Le méésentene. Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Moretti, Franco. *The Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*. (London: Verso: 1996).

replace the decaying European novel in the evolutionary world of literary forms were the first true literary commodities exported from Latin America to Europe. Abstracting it from the fate of the commodity form in the realm of culture at that point in capitalism, rather than enlightening actually obscures how the homogenization of culture has generated the distinctive regimes of inequality under which culture was and is still produced today.

Pascale Casanova will stay away from the world of forms and restrict her traveling operations to the world of national literary actors all in competition in a globalized literary institution whose center is located in Paris (and London). The mediating space between literature and the world is an autonomous international literary space that is “both a history and a geography relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, and whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space” (Casanova 72). In these spaces struggles of all sorts—political, social, national, gender, ethnic—come to be refracted, diluted, deformed and transformed into a literary logic that is invisible for the most part, and that reveals itself to those most distant from its great centers or deprived of its resources.

Many books now have been written engaging Casanova’s proposal<sup>9</sup> and there is no need for us to revisit many of those criticisms here, but rather, it is important to continue exploring the connection and consequences of this proposal in connection with Moretti’s, who is often pitted against Casanova as someone attentive to the questions of the multiplicity of forms around the globe. What is truly significant is the connection of the globalizing logic in both of these proposals. Casanova herself appeals to an empirical sample from different traditions, except that her data are not external to the objects but are a process of accumulation of the self-representation of the literary actors in relation to the literary time of the Greenwich Meridian. Those most distant from it, she contends, see more clearly the forms of violence and domination that operate within it. Casanova invents a safe space of world dimensions with writers as actors that engage in a differential struggle to extract capital to give rise to their own formal solutions. If in Moretti we have a form imbedded literally in the spatial

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<sup>9</sup> See *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergat (London: Verso, 2004). For a Latin American perspective on the topic see *América Latina en la “literatura mundial,”* Ed. Ignacio Sánchez-Prado. (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2006).

relationship between center and periphery, in Casanova we have the twin set of literary actor and nation imbedded in the competitive relation between center and periphery, carefully isolating the space of engagement of the autonomous realm of a global literary space. The theoretical operations of these models produce a particular regime of visibility of the center and periphery, carefully bulletproofing it from the political discussion of how that cultural production is part and parcel of a large understanding of the political economy of capitalism.

For Latin American critics, frankly, used to much bolder theoretical proposals, Casanova tells us nothing new. Did we not know that Rubén Darío or César Vallejo or Julio Cortázar for that matter became Latin American writers in Paris, only after formulating in their own ways their peripheral relation to that specific republic of letters? How is that anything more than the history of the formation of the *letrado* class in Latin America? But does it really tell us anything about literature as a local formation that encodes much more than the travelogue and the complexes of certain writers? The history of literature in Latin America seems to contradict such a depoliticized and ideological view of it. As Graciela Montaldo reminds us:

Each republic has those who have been expelled from it, as well as those that have deserted from it; every world has its outside where those who are different operate. Institutions have acted equally against desertion and difference through repression or capture. Like many other practices, literature has done what institutions have asked of it, but it also has done other things. Whether we use maps, diagrams, trees, or whether we design republics or fields, to forget that resistance to the order of things puts us at risk of forgetting the impulse of that which was born as a political option.  
(268)

The displacement of the conflict from the social formation of literature in its local context to a separate realm headquartered in Paris obscures the contested cultural territory of those literatures where the true impact of combined and uneven development finds expression and refracts the world order and not simply that of a world republic of letters. Casanova's world republic of letters not only does not tell us something that we already knew, but now organizes it as system and underscores once again, by doing readings from the hegemonic centers to the periphery, its ethnocentric power by postulating from that fictional space that "worlds" the world from the Paris-London axis.

Moretti's and Casanova's models in the age of globalization force us to

consider what restrictions traveling forms or actors produce and how they obfuscate the fact that literature as discourse was not primarily constituted in relation to dominant European literary centers or generic forms, but in specific historical struggles with other discourses of the nation, other emergent and residual formations such as those of oral traditions, popular culture, and more recently the culture industry. In those complicated and contested relations, literature has given expression to the conflicted nature of hegemonic culture in places where states are weak and national culture shot through with different competing projects and temporalities that only accentuate the relative unimportance of the European literary institution that Casanova projects at the center of the world.

Briefly, and for the purposes of parallel examples, let's take the García Márquez's case again in Casanova's model. "Magical realism," she contends, "was both a stroke of genius and a strike against international critical authority" (Casanova 234). García Márquez emerges as this great international actor of the world republic letters proving that even those writers, situated in the farthest away corners of the republic, can accumulate literary capital and rise to glory. It is as if in the hundred years prior to a *Hundred Years of Solitude* no literary tradition existed in Latin America to which to connect a phenomenon like García Márquez. His emergence becomes something akin to a rebel victory in a colony in a galaxy far, far away...

Moving from center through periphery, be this through a literary actor or a form, whether the global space is imagined as a transversal one in Casanova or multiple but horizontal in Moretti, the combinatory strictures on the functioning of literature outside Europe is still governed by a disseminating European center. And even if they may yield a differential understanding of certain literary economies and hierarchies of exclusion, they generate a regime of visibility of those exclusions that fundamentally occlude the precise mediations of cultural objects produced in peripheral situations and under the reality of capitalism.

Returning to our argument about the marshalling for empirical evidence for their global models, even if that evidence may qualify as nothing more than an extended list of examples, it is not difficult to speculate that this kind of material evidence gathered and ordered in the name of global and comprehensive models of literary accumulation, refrains from engaging a materialist tradition, be this

structural or dialectical, that for most of the century had those very questions at the center of its debate. As I indicated earlier in this essay, the fundamental questioning of positivism in a society marked by contradiction, is central to a critical theory of society, and therefore, to a critical theory of cultural production, that is forced to attend to the issues of mediation (*Vermittlung*), or those set of relations that denote that nothing can be independently constituted, and immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*), as the product of the identity consciousness that reifies the world<sup>10</sup>. The dialectical relationship between the social and the immanent operates at the level of the specific complexion of the object, where nothing is purely internal nor susceptible to externalization. Phenomenology and empiricism fail, according to Adorno, at apprehending a world where the whole is untrue.

Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz has taken very seriously Adorno's Marxist legacy and the epistemological premises of a non-identitarian cultural logic. In his investigations on Brazilian literature and culture he has presented to us how the untruth of the world is refracted in the cultural objects in the periphery of capitalism. It is to his work that I now turn.

### *III. Elective affinities: aesthetics, globality and critical theory*

The elective affinity between Adorno's critical theory and the cultural realities of the periphery of capitalism becomes evident, if we assume that implicit in critical theory is a commitment to a global understanding of cultural production, and in so far as the background of a critical-theoretical analysis always is, or at least attempts to be, an understanding and a theorization of culture under capitalism. The fact that Adorno did not work on peripheral cultures nor made it his intention to theorize them is neither problematic, nor ironic in the case in point. It is simply irrelevant. In other words, the critical-theoretical impetus of the Frankfurt School travels rather well because it attempts an understanding of culture within the global phenomenon of capitalism. What is at stake is a dialectical understanding of cultural phenomena, which by definition find their specific and particular expression in the historicity of their materials, that is in a dialectic of the particular and the universal, or more precisely in the dialectic of the

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. "Metacritique of Epistemology" *The Adorno Reader*. Ed. Brian O' Connor. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 130.

particularities of the local and the global condition.

Roberto Schwarz's writings on the importing of the novel to Brazil present us today with one of the most exemplary Adornian contributions to the study of a literary phenomenon in the periphery of capitalism. The writing of Brazil's premier Marxist critic have appeared for some time now regularly in English translation (including several of his more recent essays that are featured in *New Left Review* on a regular basis), making him not an unknown author in metropolitan circles. However, the broader recognition of his dialectical criticism in the tradition of Frankfurt School and the implications it has for the life of critical theory today seem yet to be fully appreciated.

The essays of Roberto Schwarz are difficult to decipher because of the astute way that this Brazilian critic has of situating himself with respect to his tradition. On one level, as the preeminent student of Antonio Candido, Schwarz always offers an up-to-date and committed reading of Candido's work, and always defends his contribution as a precursor to the social study of form. On another level, to update and revitalize his teacher's contributions, Schwarz reconceptualizes Candido's insights by drawing upon the development of Marxist aesthetics of the last third of the century, especially as it is to be found in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno's fundamental concepts enter Schwarz's critical work in an organic and natural way. As a critic on the left, Schwarz constructs strategies of writing that permit him to legitimize himself as a Brazilian who defends a dialectical socio-historical approach to literature, while at the same time offering a perspective on the social codification of literary form which permits him to outdistance the sterile debate between realism and modernism that the other great literary critic of Brazil, Luiz Costa Lima, persists in reenacting. According to Schwarz, Costa Lima classifies literary production in the following way:

[ . . . ] on the one hand, the backward looking, mere imitation of historical reality, absence of formal anxiety, ideological redundancy, the illusion of an unbounded linguistic transparency; on the other hand, the forward looking, literary production of the new, the anti-mimetic rupture, awareness of the efficacy specific to language, the disconnecting of the antennae of reference. (Schwarz, "Misplaced" 30)

Instead of repeating the debate between Lukács and Adorno that took place in the thirties, Schwarz ingeniously proceeds to dismantle Costa Lima's premises about realism and as a consequence enters into a serious exploration of Adorno's later

elaborations on mimesis and literary forms. In reframing the debate and in offering us his careful analysis of the later fiction of Machado de Assis, Schwarz makes a unique contribution to our understanding of how the ciphering of the social referent works. The concept of mimetic impulse in Adorno and in Schwarz recasts the problem of the tracing of reality as something *internal* to the literary object. The mimetic impulse is not the reflection of reality that Lukács talked about, but is rather a rethinking of the dynamic of form that distinguishes the Marxist study of form from that of a simple literary formalism. Or, as Schwarz puts it so well, the problem with literary formalism, ironically, is to have underestimated literary form itself.

Although Schwarz had already made reference to the importance of the Frankfurt School for our times, especially in his intellectual and personal history entitled “Um Seminário de Marx,”<sup>11</sup> the fundamental text in which Schwarz firmly posits his position on literary forms is the essay “Critical Adequation and National Originality.” Some of the basic Adornian principles in this essay include the idea that the work in its specific historical time codifies reality and returns it to us articulated in a formal language that reveals the contradictions of its production. In contrast to the theory of realism as reflection, here society appears encapsulated in a formal apparatus of autonomous unfolding, whose logic escapes external comparison. A second concept elaborated by both Benjamin and Adorno, that of constellation, appears in the essay in order to explain why there cannot be only one way of tracing reality or, to refute Lukács, why there is no prescription for writing like Balzac: one must instead find the configurations or the constellations within the text that illuminate its historical moment. As Schwarz says:

[...] we can say that a good eye for an historical likeness *between unlike structures* is perhaps the key faculty of materialist criticism—a criticism for which literature is understood to work with materials and formations engendered (in the final analysis) outside of its own literary domain—materials and formations that give to the literary its substance and that make possible its dynamism. Let us reiterate that the goal of this type of conception is not to reduce one structure to another, but to reflect historically on their mutually-formed constellation. Here we follow in the *stereoscopic* line of Walter Benjamin, with its particular acuity for noting, e.g., the importance of market mechanisms in the overall shape of Baudelaire’s poetry. (7)

This idea of the ciphering of social truth in a momentary, unconscious, and

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<sup>11</sup> Translated as “A seminar on Marx” in *Hopscotch*, volume 1, number 1, 1999.

kaleidoscopic way distances Schwarz from Lukács as well as from the geneticism of Goldmann, and leaves Costa Lima out of the debate. It also renders mute the dead end discussions revolving around the relationship between original and copy. The opposition between original and copy becomes a false opposition because it does not let us to see the share of the foreign in the nationally specific, or of the imitative in the original and of the original in the imitative and what they reveal about the unequal relation of Brazilian forms and European ideas.

*IV. Form as social cipher: the importing of the novel to Brazil*<sup>12</sup>

The great merit of Roberto Schwarz's work results from his having dedicated his life to studying the codification of the social life of Brazil under slavery in the fiction of Machado de Assis. How do we explain these novels that are not representative of what we understand by nineteenth century realism but whose formal innovations are nevertheless directly related to the social reality of Brazil? It is here that Schwarz's exemplary way of making Adorno's premises on literary form and their historicity his own allows him to elaborate a convincing reading of how the narrative function of Machado de Assis' later novels traces rather than reflects the contradictions of the Brazilian dominant elite. In his meticulous study on the work of this author, Schwarz demonstrates how Machado de Assis' formal innovations operate on the level of a narrator whose volatile character, rather than being a narrative flaw, articulates the subject position of the Brazilian elites of the end of the nineteenth century. It is in this articulation of the narrator's point of view that, according to Schwarz, Machado de Assis achieves "a realism," not in the traditional sense of the term but in the sense of the unconscious tracing of social reality.

The clash characterized by the importation of liberal European ideas received into a slave-based economic model produced this peripheral form of the realist novel, one that redefined both realism and the novel in a specifically Brazilian way. What is best exemplified in these Brazilian novels is that the subjective is not reduced to the linguistic or communicative realm but is embedded in a configurational form of the novel, one that exceeds the description of what is narrated. The narrator functions in his relations to other characters and to the

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<sup>12</sup> An earlier version of this argument can be found in my chapter "Peripheral Glances: Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in Brazil in *Globalizing Critical Theory*, Max Pensky editor (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).



structure of the plot as a cipher of the social articulation of the characters. The volatility of the narrator is not modest in scope for “it reaches to the world at large and to the artistic medium in depth” (89). Schwarz writes:

The outstanding feature of this and other novels by Machado de Assis is the extraordinary volatility of the narrator, who will change his mind, his subject and his mode of speech at almost every sentence, and will not hold the same course for longer than a short paragraph. There is an aspect of self-gratification to this changing disposition and to the rhetorical virtuosity that goes with it, a sort of kick to be derived from each one of these switches of level, which links up with the desire for recognition we just talked about. It will be decisive for my argument. And since this feature subordinates everything else in the book, we may call it the principle of its form. (88)

For Schwarz, the Brazilian character of Machado de Assis' novels does not reside in the extraordinary thoroughness of the local observation that he well understood, nor is it cancelled out by his universal discourse, which is an important level of the work, but it lies rather in the fact that these two dimensions are present in a simultaneous, complex and negative way. It is this dissonant combination which relativizes them and which gives them an intimate historical character. What Schwarz has elucidated for us is more than just workings of the novel-form in nineteenth century Brazil (which in his typical modesty is all he would claim to have done), rather, he has provided us with a way of understanding how by investigating the anachronistic juxtaposition of forms of modern civilization and realities originating in the colonial period we can discern the figure of the modern capitalist world. In a specific form he seeks to specify a social mechanism that is an internal and active element of Brazilian culture where European ideas were misplaced or off-centre in relation to their European usage. He summarizes his intent in the following way:

I have presented a historical explanation for this displacement, an explanation which brought in relations of production an parasitism in Brazil, our economic dependency and its counterpart, the intellectual hegemony of Europe, revolutionized by capital. In short, in order to analyze a national peculiarity, sensed in everyday life, we have been driven to reflect on the colonial process, which was international. The constant interchange of liberalism and favour was the local and opaque effect of a planetary mechanism. (Schwarz, “Misplaced” 30)

From the vantage point of immanent critique, for Adorno and Schwarz, the antithesis of universal and particular, too, is both necessary and deceptive. Neither

one exists without the other—the particular only as defined and thus universal, the universal only as the definition of something particular, and thus itself particular. The form of the novel in Brazil reveals to us the internal working of an aesthetic object inscribed historically in a place and time that does articulate through its formal workings a national reality that comprises not only the present, but the heritage of a colonial past and, therefore, the reality of Brazil in its larger insertion in the capitalist world. Faithful to a critical-theoretical epistemology Schwarz, like Adorno, make of the primacy of the object the cornerstone of dialectical criticism.

*V. Globalization: complex, modern, national and negative*

Let me return to the apparent redundant idea of globalizing critical theory to point out that the work of Roberto Schwarz brings us to the question of how a culture, even in this period of globalization, is still imbedded in a national experience that is modern, complex and negative, and that, whatever the effects of the process of globalization, it mediates these experiences through an idiom that is linguistically, culturally and nationally specific, as well as in dialogue with a defined and inherited tradition.

The enthusiasm that seems to have overtaken the humanities about the possibilities of a politics that is truly global contrasts with the economic realities of globalization and its relationship to the nation-state. The economic reality is that global corporations continue to rely heavily on domestic state structures that fall within the traditional bounds of individual governments, presiding over bordered territories, advancing domestic agendas and regulating national economies. A cohesive nation-state regulating the free market seems to be essential for capitalist growth. If in doubt, check the political agendas of powerful emerging economies like Brazil and India. Brazil sues the United States for holding tariffs that violate the World Trade Organization agreements, lobbies heavily for a position in the U.N. Security Council, and secures bilateral agreements with other nation-states to advance its place in the world economy.

Our cultural forms, including literature, are inscribed in this highly complex interaction between global capitalism and local responses to the realities and the discourses on globalization, mediated through specific linguistic and national formations. It is perhaps in this context that—as the work of Roberto Schwarz has shown—that a return to Adorno for an illumination of the functioning

of aesthetic forms may be not as anachronistic as one could have thought, but is rather quite timely, if one is willing to pay attention to the impact peripheral glances may have on the critical-theoretical tradition of Adorno himself.

Reading literature in its specific and concrete manifestation, which includes the specificity of a language, a social and cultural milieu and yes, why not, a specific relation to a national tradition in dialogue with a large Western canon is a delimitation that ought not to escape us nor should we wish to relegate it in favor of globalist theories of literary production. To walk that line would be to embark on the globalism adventure that renders cultural specificity empty and that translates referentiality to that international space that once again defines the rest of the world in relation to the spatiality of empire. For those in the periphery of capitalism, the vicissitudes of their own reality, social, economic, political and aesthetic are at the center and the mediations of globalization take interesting aesthetic forms that reveal much to us about the current state of capitalism. Proceeding immanently to understand what these artifacts articulate, keeping at bay the danger of letting literary theory be, *pace* Hans Blumenberg, nothing but the high point in the career of a globalized metaphor.

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