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World Literature as Rebel Literature: Humanist Internationalism in the Peripheries

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Since its publication in 2021, Auritro Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery* has drawn considerable critical attention and praise. Consider, for example, Maria Elisa Cevasco's assessment that Majumder's efforts "to demonstrate the critical and political possibilities available to a reading of world literature from a peripheral point of view" constitute a vital contribution to the task of harnessing the discipline of world literature to a project of social transformation (Cevasco 2022, 411). Following in the footsteps of the Austro-Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, Majumder provides a sociologically attuned identification of the category of "peripheral aesthetics," and this, Cevasco notes, is central to the transformative possibilities that Majumder's analysis brings into focus (Cevasco 2022, 412). For Majumder, the very "condition of possibility of peripheral aesthetics" is the combined and uneven development that is engendered by the "juxtaposition of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production" (Majumder 2021, 27) with the capitalist mode dominating. Consequently, Cevasco observes, Majumder demonstrates peripherality as an integral part of the capitalist world-system, offers compelling confirmation that aesthetic form functions as an abstract of existing social relations, and evidences the explanatory capacity of Western Marxism to respond to "the demands of the present" (Cevasco 2022, 413, 414). Consider also Keya Ganguly's estimation that Majumder's book "valuably charts the ways that peripheral writers focalize connections not only among those in Asia, Latin America, or Africa, but also with thinkers in Europe and North America, all joined in various endeavors to articulate the historical experience of uneven development, on the one hand, and advocate for an alternative telos of social and political possibility" (Ganguly 2022, 408). Like Cevasco, Ganguly also identifies "the conceptually driven step" embodied in Majumder's materialist reading of aesthetic form, a critical endeavour that, Ganguly notes, seeks to

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advance an understanding of what Fredric Jameson dubbed the "historicity of forms" (Ganguly 2022, 409). This attentiveness in Majumder's work to the relation of form and history illustrates, *inter alia*, the depoliticizing and "perverse effect of rendering peripheral writing into the mirror image of metropolitan thinking" (Ganguly 2022, 410). Meanwhile, in her contribution to the same forum, Rashmi Varma extended Majumder's reading of the "predicament of tribals in contemporary India" to elaborate an understanding of "primitivism in the peripheries as a project of peripheral internationalism and radical anticolonialism" (in contradistinction to colonialist exotic and romantic interpretations) (Varma 2022, 418, 419). Moreover, in language that recalls Edward Said's argument for *worldliness* as a critical-ethical imperative, Varma praised the recuperative thrust of Majumder's project that, in its traversing of a long and globally interconnected twentieth century, "brings to light" hitherto neglected, marginalized, and repressed conversations and debates from the "geohistorical regions of the peripheral world" (Varma 2022, 423; Said 1991). Indeed, for Majumder, peripheral internationalism constitutes a "reading method" that "recuperates, reconstellates, and recognizes previously unknown relations between disparate objects" (Majumder 2021, 38–39). Additionally, Sandeep Banerjee has drawn attention to the manner in which Majumder's "two luminous phrases," *insurgent imagination* and *peripheral internationalism*, should be understood as historically specific rearticulations of, respectively, Ernst Bloch's concept of a "principle of hope" and Raymond Williams's notion of a "structure of feeling" (Banerjee 2022, 400–01; Bloch 1954–59; Williams 1977).

Critical considerations of Majumder's book, then, have already done much to illuminate its significant generative potential for those committed to historically circumstanced, materialist modes of inquiry. Nevertheless, to elucidate further the book's explanatory promise, in this brief review essay I will draw out what I perceive to be some productive capacities that warrant further unpacking. Above all else, I suggest, the matter of the book's *rebel thrust*, which should be understood as provocative more than polemical, demands our attention. This 'rebel thrust' operates on multiple registers but principally via Majumder's comparative methodology that connects marginalized cultural artefacts and materials generated within the peripheries of global capitalism to demonstrate the making of almost completely unknown "South-South" alliances. Connecting India to Mexico and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, to Vietnam, Cuba, and the Congo in the 1960s and 1970s, and to present-day China and the United States, Majumder tracks how "an understudied constellation of writers outside the 'West' was drawing more on one another than on the imperial center when it came to their aesthetic sensibilities." This recuperative critical work, Majumder persuasively contends, "is vital for correcting the assumption that the colonized were always responding, or writing back, to their former masters," and reveals how, "in a sense, these writers were marginalizing the center and placing the periphery in a new center" (Majumder 2021, ix). By this means, diverging from projects that

seek to situate peripheral cultural materials in relation to activities in the core capitalist nations, Majumder documents a networked history of anticolonial solidarity. Strikingly, such an endeavour conceives of resistance not in the terms of *naïveté* or mere wishful thinking, but rather as historically documentable and belonging to the essential, as yet incomplete, universalist project of human liberation. We can also identify a commitment to a dissident humanist internationalism at work in the book's explicit and nuanced revalorization of cultural materialism – a critical tradition which Majumder notes has in recent decades unanticipatedly returned, albeit not always without misrepresentation and disconnection from emancipatory politics (Majumder 2021, 22). As such, we can note in passing that among its many virtues, Majumder's work usefully serves to counteract a gamut of recent interventions, very much in vogue, that have adopted the banner of "post-critique" as their siren call and which have maintained that historical criticism and surface-depth modes of reading and interpretation amount to a "vulgar sociology" (Felski 2015, 171).[1]

The extent to which Majumder's enterprise is a powerful antidote to recent depoliticizing theoretical trends is also evidenced by his insistence on the counter-hegemonic character of Third World culture. Drawing on Jameson's much maligned and misunderstood essay, "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism" (an essay which for Majumder "remains the pioneering attempt at a systematic delineation of the relation between the world-system and peripheral literary cultures"), Majumder elaborates an understanding of culture as a privileged "site of *emancipatory contestation*" (Majumder 2021, 28, emphasis in the original). Crucially, this position requires no misty-eyed romanticism as to the revolutionary capacities of art. Instead, Majumder seeks to advance an understanding that the very category of Third World aesthetics "rests on an oppositional critique whose conceptual basis bears retrieval" (Majumder 2021, 28). The urgency of this critical work of retrieval – and the attendant demands of recontextualization and re-politicization – is attested to by the anti-radical *zeitgeist* of our times. Practices of commodification and monetization of cultural materials expressly hostile to capitalism are now so commonplace – and widely effective – that Naomi Klein's analysis in *No Logo* of the ways in which consumer capitalism has sapped radical movements of their ability to challenge the structures of political and economic power resonates even more powerfully today than it did on its first publication more than twenty years ago (Klein 1999). Consideration of Majumder's reading of Third World political cinema elaborates the point.

"Third Cinema" was a radical cinema of liberation and anti-imperialism that emerged in the Third World and most especially in Latin America. The work of the book's third chapter is the tracing of the "creative adaptation of Latin American Third Cinema in the South Asian context" (Majumder 2021, 85). This is achieved in large part by focusing on the work of Mrinal Sen, a filmmaker who has long been considered one of the most eclectic, creative, and adventurous practitioners of the "New Wave" of Indian political cinema.

Arguing that Sen's work expanded and reconfigured the aesthetics of Latin American Third Cinema in South Asia (this is *not* an argument about simple "passive influence"), Majumder demonstrates "an important [and until now] overlooked instance of peripheral ideational exchange" (Majumder 2021, 85). The impact of this global mapping of South-South cultural exchange includes the refusal of the subsumption of Third Cinema within the category of a depoliticized "World Cinema" while also recalling Third World cinema's original aspirations, described here by Fredric Jameson:

> "The promise of alternate forms in [the Third World] cinema of that now distant period we call the 60s (but which covered the 70s as well, in chronological retrospect), included the promise of alternate ways of life, alternate collective and communal structures, that were expected to emerge from a variety of struggles against economic, military, and cultural imperialism (and in some cases, those of China, Cuba, and Vietnam, for example, this promise overlapped with the Second-World project of the constructions of socialism)." (Jameson 1992, 186)

However, Third World political cinema met with a hostile environment for its reception in the core capitalist countries almost from its inception. The decade of the 1970s was marked by political reactionism and this was but a prelude to the transition from the post-World War Two era of embedded liberalism to the post-1979 era of disembedded neoliberalism. By the time of the collapse of historical communism in 1989, the political aspirations of Third Cinema had, in the mainstream of opinion in the Global North, come to be regarded as outmoded. The 'there is no alternative' mantra of what Mark Fisher would later designate as "capitalist realism" was taking hold (Fisher 2014). Such were the conditions for the birth of a politically de-fanged 'World Cinema,' a marketing label (viz. Klein's analysis mentioned above) rather than a genre, designed to smooth the absorption of an oppositional Third World cinematic culture into "the international entertainment industry" to furnish "vibrant but politically acceptable images of social pluralism for the late capitalist big city" (Jameson 1992, 187). Of course, the fate of Third Cinema is but a striking example of what remains a broader trend and Majumder draws attention to instances of comparable depoliticization in other arenas when he reminds us that contemporary cultural theory has domesticated both Gramsci and Fanon (Majumder 2021, 33). Further, we might also recall at this juncture Ganguly's point about the dangers of rendering Third World culture into the "mirror image" of the discourses and modes of metropolitan thinking – in this manner peripheral radicalism is appropriated and stifled.

In this context, Majumder's analysis of Sen's cinematic "lumpen aesthetics" does critical work, restoring to Sen's works their essential politics and renewing their radicalism by demonstrating that they "illuminate a historical sequence that we continue to inhabit" (Majumder 2021, 86). Majumder's extended analysis of Sen's aesthetically innovative and politically charged *Calcutta 71* is exemplary in this regard. Released in 1972, *Calcutta 71* tells four interconnected stories that date from 1933, 1943, 1953, and 1971. There are the stories of two families, one "an indigent family in the slums seeking shelter from a

catastrophic thunderstorm" and another family that includes "a widowed mother, an elder sister, and two younger brothers who take to prostitution and crime." There is also the story of "a teenager and his gang of friends who illegally transport food grains from the city to villages," and, finally, the story of a Naxalite activist "who sees himself as carrying on the legacy of these marginalized subjects" (Majumder 2021, 97). Cumulatively, these four stories communicate a "unified history […] of urban immiseration and resistance" via an extraordinary diversity of aesthetic techniques and styles including Brechtian and Godardian filmic modernism, the incorporation of Bengali oral cultural traditions, film noir, melodrama, and social realism, as well as an eclectic soundtrack that includes popular, classical, jazz, and indigenous musical genres (Majumder 2021, 104). This juxtaposition of techniques is, Majumder argues, to be understood as "a formally concentrated expression of what Roberto Schwarz has termed the misplacement of ideas" and a Benjaminian constellation of cinema as an insurrectionary force (Majumder 2021, 114). Additionally, when he argues that such techniques of juxtaposition in South Asian Third Cinema register the "interdependent nature of the three worlds and the mediations produced therein," that Sen's films share "aesthetic coordinates with commercial Bengali cinema," and that Sen's *oeuvre* "complicates the rigid separation between First, Second, and Third Cinema," Majumder elaborates a non-hierarchical theory of a rebel cinema of the world-system that prompts us to look again at Third Cinema as a resource on which we might draw in the attempt to conceive of radical futures and radical alternatives to the hegemony of global capitalism (Majumder 2021, 89, 105).

Documenting the sociopolitical history of a diverse corpus of primary cultural materials, *Insurgent Imaginations* elaborates the argument that the global peripheries constitute a geohistorical location in which an oppositional, universalist radical humanism has a long history and deep roots. It thus powerfully demonstrates that the roots of so-called 'European' humanism cannot be traced to Europe alone. And it substantiates these points by drawing on cultural materials that are either barely known in the academies of the Global North or that have been appropriated to suit the demands of metropolitan multiculturalism. Against the grain of our times, Majumder's *Insurgent Imaginations* recuperates a long and rich history of rebel, peripheral literature and culture. Along the way, it reveals the potential of this neglected cultural history for the reenergizing of oppositional culture as a basis for the renewal of emancipatory struggle today.

Notes

[1] For a useful overview of "post-critique" scholarship see: Leo Robson, "Jameson After Post-Critique," *New Left Review*, 144 (2023): 111–132.

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