World Literature, Non-Synchronism, and the Politics of Time

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New Comparisons in World Literature

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I would like to express my gratitude to the series editors, Neil Lazarus and Pablo Mukherjee, for their support and for always being an inspiring guide. Many thanks to colleagues who have supported me with their generosity, friendship and encouragement during the past few years: Alice Ferrebe, James Whitehead, Jo Croft, Glenda Norquay, Kathryn Walchester, Jonathan Cranfield, Michael Morris, Ross Dawson, Patricia Murray, Colin Harrison, Rebecca Bailey, Deaglan O’Donghaile, Jude Piesse, Jo Price, Gerry Smyth, Bella Adams, Joe Moran, Elspeth Graham, Anna Maria Cimitile, Miguel Mellino, Guido Rings, Deepika Bahri, Stephen Morton, Lisa Lau, Chantal Zabus, Pina Piccolo, Nilufer Bharucha, Katharine Cox, Danielle Chavrimootoo, Chiara Zuanni, Michael Birchall, Lee Wright, Alex Miles, Helen Rogers, Emily Cuming, Steven Spittle, Nedim Hassan, Nickianne Moody, David Tyrer and Joe Sim. My students at Liverpool John Moores University, especially Christinna Hobbs and my postcolonial writing and world literature classes. Vicky Bates, Tomas René and Rebecca Hinsley at Palgrave for their work and help. The anonymous peer-reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and the production team. On a personal note, I would like to say thank you to: i Milanesi in Cambridge (Fra and Irving), Yata and Yuriko, Yama and Mami, Vale, Ale and Oscar, Ricky and Manu, Donata and Antonio, Raffo, Simona and Adele, and my family (Luigi, Elena, Gregorio, Francesca, Chiara, Angelo, Carolina, Camillo, Vinicio and Pizzi). Dedicato a Roberta e ad Alessandro.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: World Literature
Beyond Synchronism

The introduction situates the concept of non-synchronism in current debates in world literary studies. Drawing on the Warwick Research Collective’s concept of world literature, non-synchronism is presented as a dialectical and materialist way of thinking the temporality of literary expression from peripheral formations of the capitalist world economy. In its aesthetic and social aspects, the temporal dimension analysed in the introduction is affiliated to discourses on a singular modernity, the questions of totality and of peripheral modernism, the antinomies of Ernst Bloch’s philosophy, and debates on culture and politics at the heart of literary criticism after postcolonialism. Non-synchronism opposes both teleological views of history and the relativism of ideologies of multiple modernities, illustrating how heterogeneous temporalities need to be located within the systemic frame of reference imposed by the accumulation of capital.

1 The Antinomies of World Literature

In a recent book titled The Ministry of Nostalgia, writer and journalist Owen Hatherley sketches telling reflections on the resurgence of a wave of nostalgia in contemporary Britain. He observes that the insecurities of the current historical moment have provoked a widespread yearning for the times of post-war Austerity, a “nostalgia for the state of being
– solid, stoic, public spirited, as opposed to the depoliticised, hysterical and privatised reality of Britain over the last thirty years” (21). This nostalgic feeling, Hatherley continues, at the same time “as it evokes a sense of loss over the decline of an idea of Britain and the British, it is both reassuring and flattering, implying a virtuous (if highly self-aware) consumer stoicism” (ibid.). Contemporary nostalgia surfaces in the recycling of symbols and maxims of times past as political weapons to address the crisis and impoverishment determined by the rise of the neoliberal economy. Nostalgia feeds on a perception of the present as hopeless, unstable, insecure and puzzling; it nurtures the longing for stable, clear and solid old times. It hence implies a fascination with the past—often an idealised, mythical, never-really-experienced past—as a symptom of discontent in the present, and it is not limited to Britain. In countries as distant and different as India, the USA, Italy and Egypt, for example, the political stage is increasingly dominated by emergent political forces built on explicitly nostalgic agendas, such as “taking back” national borders and the purity of national communities, the ideal of making nations great “again,” the rise of fundamentalist rhetorics, localisms, neo-fascism and religious orthodoxies, accompanied by enduring states of emergency. These trends seem to reveal a quite depressing historical conjuncture in which, as philosopher Slavoj Zizek puts it, people had better reject any uplifting narrative and embrace instead the “courage of hopelessness.” Many political movements, today, seem to express hopelessness through a retrospective gaze summoning the past, rather than the future, as blueprint for imagining the present. Thus, anti-immigrant rhetoric in Britain after the Brexit vote, for example, envisions life outside the European Union by turning to a concept of the nation as white and mythical imagined community pre-existing Britain’s joining of the European Union in 1973, but also by threatening the legal status of the so-called Windrush generation which settled in Britain from the Caribbean in the 1940s and 1950s. The act of looking back towards the past in order to respond to an uncertain present is not, of course, a new thing exclusive to the regressive and conservative populism of twenty-first-century Europe.

The return of the past as form of political mobilisation is a very peculiar fact, though, which cannot be explained away by recourse to developmental or teleological concepts of history, whereby these revenants would necessarily be overcome once the entire planet has been rationalised and disenchanted. The re-enchantment of the world seems to occur, today, in non-Western societies as among the wealthiest,
supposedly most “modern” societies of late capitalism, at the centre of technological advancement and the capital flows of the world economy. Transgressing the binary of West vs Rest, or South vs North, these emergent phenomena suggest that geographical and historical distinctions might not be entirely sufficient to explain how the world is changing today: atavistic social formations pop up everywhere, from Paris to Mumbai, and communication technologies make the drawing of boundaries increasingly difficult; community and society, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* constantly merge and overlap. As Harry Harootunian writes in his compelling analysis of the global expansion of capitalism in *Marx After Marx*, “the supposed unity of time projected by capital and nation-state is a masquerade that invariably fails to conceal the ceaseless confrontation of different times” (23). Capitalism’s global remit has not resulted in a total synchronisation leading to the disappearance of the past or the full realisation of a homogeneous, empty time. In fact, capitalism’s becoming produces what Harootunian describes as “uneven temporalities” (26): “contretemps, simultaneous nonsimultaneities … contemporaneous noncontemporaneities or uneven times … time’s turmoil, times out of joint, multiple temporalities,” and forms of untimeliness “fully immanent to what constitutes normative social time” (23).

The current wave of nostalgia is a symptom of how global capitalism has entailed a reconfiguration of the historical consciousness whereby multiple times are constantly revived, reconstructed and appropriated. For this reason, these returns reveal a specific kind of unevenness at the core of globalisation itself—a social and *temporal* unevenness affecting structures of feeling within the world economy. Capitalism does not produce homogeneity; instead, it triggers planned obsolescences, externalities, under-development, residual formations and invented traditions that vividly disrupt any linear narrative of betterment. Accordingly, the re-emergence of the past as contemporary political idiom opens crucial questions about the intersections between politics and culture: Are these calls and returns to an imagined past a by-product of modernity or are they survivals of pre- or non-modern societies? Do the expansion and development of capitalism necessarily provoke these returns, or are these symptoms of a possible resistance to capitalism, a new Romanticism set against what Michael Löwy has called the “tide of modernity”? Is the return of the past ideological mystification or does it manifest the
critical consciousness of a real social condition? Can the sudden appearance of untimely times inspire progressive change in the present or, as Hatherley observes, when “it comes to treating the past as a weapon, the Conservative Party are, and always have been, the experts” (12)?

The main argument of this research is that the appearance of non-contemporaneous elements in the present should not be dismissed as nostalgic survival or retrospective longing, a mere sign of obscurantism and regression. The idioms of nostalgia, Golden Ages and romantic populisms are all expressions of deeper and wider dynamics of historical capitalism. Indeed, the emergence of non-contemporaneous remnants—the conjuncture of diverging temporalities in the present, what in this book will be defined “non-synchronism”—testifies to the way in which the global expansion of capitalism has redefined the very concept and experience of time. What non-synchronic emergences reveal is that, in peripheral zones of global capitalism, the temporal consciousness of the present is inhabited by multiple layers and strata: capitalism produces a sort of political unconscious of time itself, which can be reactivated at any time and in many different guises. Non-synchronism, in other words, would allow to rethink current discourses about nostalgia, the return of the past, the survival of atavism as well as utopian anticipations of the future in the present. Instead of seeing these aspects as aberrations or deviations from the norm, the concept of non-synchronism allows to grasp that a multi-layered notion of the present is a constitutive dimension of capitalist modernity. Most importantly, non-synchronism is a productive critical tool that, as it will be shown, avoids either celebrating or condemning any non-contemporaneous element by situating it in an open-ended and dialectical concept of history. As a conjuncture of incommensurable times, non-synchronism captures basic structures common to a wide range of events and phenomena of the present which, in spite of their coevalness and presence, are perceived to belong to another temporal frame.

This book explores these themes in relation to the emerging field of world literature and, more precisely, in order to build on central issues opened by an important publication by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC 2015), that is, how the paradigm of world literature affects the very concept of time in the humanities, and the relationship between time and literary representation. In an important passage of their volume Combined and Uneven Development, WReC points out that the concept of world literature is neither a mode of reading nor a
canon of works but rather a literature that “registers” the modern world system. WReC suggests that “the effectivity of the world-system will necessarily be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world-system exists unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being” (20). Some key elements seem to animate WReC’s formulation: firstly, a concept of modernity understood as the historical regime produced by the global expansion of capitalism as hegemonic mode of production. This historical regime is uneven, incomplete and non-synchronous because it is still expanding, intensively as well as extensively, through the constant activation of the process of the accumulation of capital. Secondly, a vision of literature as archive and record of the social, political and spatio-temporal dimensions of this system from the periphery rather than the centre and, thirdly, the creation of a new critical space addressing a level of experience that is common to all literature of modernity.¹ WReC’s definition does not fragment the experience of capitalist modernity in a plurality of modernisms emanating from untranslatable cultural sites. Furthermore, WReC’s perspective on world literature does not restrict the term to a canon of globally circulating and translated works: WReC’s emphasis on peripherality entails a shift from globalism, circulation and exchange to internationalism, labour and production. The systemic dimension creates a structure of commensurability and comparability across difference that is very much needed as helpful alternative to the insistence on break and disjuncture harnessed by a great part of postcolonial theory.² WReC convincingly follows Fredric Jameson’s statement on the “meaning of modernity” as “worldwide capitalism” (Jameson 2003, 12): a singular modernity rather than “pious hopes for cultural variety in a future world colonized by a universal market order” (13). Moving away from a fetishised idea of “the West” to a politically conscious engagement with concrete realities of exploitation enforced by neoliberal capitalism through imperialism and the international division of labour, world literature allows insight into the narrative shaping of the historical temporality of a global modernity.

WReC enriches the idea of a singular modernity by going beyond Euro-American debates on modernism and by examining “the way in which capitalist social relations are ‘lived’ – different in every given instance for the simple reason that no two social instances are the same” (WReC 12). Instead of equating modernity with “the west,” WReC deploys the totalising background of global capitalism as necessary reference to understand the specific inequalities constituting the colonial and
postcolonial histories of peripheral societies. Indeed, the idea of “unevenness” not only refers to the question of a spatially and geographically uneven distribution of resources through the circuits of the market, finance capital and the international division of labour. Temporally, unevenness also illuminates what WReC calls the “historically determinate coexistence” (ibid.) of a palimpsest of overlapping moments of history that compose the material conditions of social formations beyond capitalism’s core. WReC points out, the “multiple forms of appearance of unevenness” need to be seen as “being governed by a socio-historical logic of combination, rather than as being contingent and systematic” (ibid.). The acknowledgement that modernity needs to be seen through the “coexistence” of multiple chronotopical realities opens up a vital question for the study of world literature: How can the paradigm of world literature lead to rethinking the specific historicities of an uneven modernity? How do these experiences actively “combine,” and how does literature register this process of coexistence and combination? Does a singular modernity entail a singular time and a common history, and how to account for the “multiple forms” in which the history of modernity unfolds? This book takes as its point of departure WReC’s suggestion that world literature registers the multiple ways in which global modernity is historically determined. This means moving away, radically, from the culturalist tendencies of postcolonial studies focused on the rubrics of identity and hybridity. Instead of treating literature as an emanation of the author’s cultural background, world literature connects the sphere of the literary to the material conditions of existence engendered by the uneven and combined global expansion of capitalism. Yet, through the concept of “registration,” it also avoids labelling literary texts as symptoms and mystifications of the cultural industry of the global economy: literature does not merely “express” or “mirror,” but rather actively “register,” the material history of modernity. WReC’s emphasis on the term registering reveals a firm focus on literature’s entanglement in the blood and fire of worlds of exploitation, marginalisation and class struggle rather than restricting the remit of world literature to literary celebrities, canons and anthologies. As a register, world literature furnishes an idiom and a range through which oppressed peoples can form a historical consciousness of the condition of peripherality.

The term register offers a useful starting point for reimagining the aesthetic dimension of world literature. While the term registering aims to signal a commitment to the social reality being represented in fiction,
it also connotes the fact that fictional works express and convey a multiplicity of layers and dimensions that constitute and coexist in historical reality. A register signals the ability to conjoin disjointed times in the passage from history to story. The musical connotation of the term register may be adopted as a guiding metaphor for addressing literary texts as sort of chromatic “ranges” or sets of tones, a diverse representational spectrum where multiple times appear, combine and interact. From this point of view, considering world literature as register of the global expansion of historical capitalism could mean, as in a musical register, a span of expressive possibilities spread across a wide range of uneven temporalities: the representation of modern history as a range of tones and temporal variations. Following Fredric Jameson’s analysis of the narrative representation of time in *Valences of the Dialectic*, the aim of an aesthetic of non-synchronism is hence to explore what Jameson calls “the way in which existential and historical times intersect” in literature, “and in particular how a multiplicity of existential times, an opening up of the representational fan to register and include a variety of personal temporalities, might be expected to pick up the vibrations of the more properly historical ones” (521). Jameson’s reference to a multiplicity of times—personal and historical, overlapping and intersecting in fiction—points to a concept of registering that involves an expansion of the time of the narration to include hetero-temporalities and asynchronicities. The active, expressive connotation of the term register demands the awareness that fictional works reframe reality in different guises and, most importantly, that literature captures reality’s non-synchronism primarily by revealing rifts between system and event.

Emphasising world literature as register should not be taken for a nominalistic restriction of the literary to the level of form. Practices of registration rather capture an aesthetic and epistemological ground able to connect emplotment and narrative strategy to concrete reality, showing that literary representation is not detached from historical depth. Registration is an active positioning of the labour of narrative as worldly practice and dialectical mediation between artistic form and historical experience. From this point of view, non-synchronism does not merely emerge as a theme of the fiction analysed in this book, such as peasant rebellions or evocations of a Golden Age. Literary works are, by definition, non-synchronic because the time in which they “take place” is always split between the moment of narratorial composition and the long-term strata of history, framing and embedded narratives, the past being remembered.
and recuperated, and the anticipation of futures that have not yet taken place. The specifically aesthetic quality of non-synchronism signifies the conjuncture or articulation of these diverging times: following Michael Wayne, my concept of the aesthetic is configured as a “point of mediation” (Wayne 93) between experience and expression, story and history. Rather than being restricted to categories of beauty and the sublime, an expanded and materialist notion of aesthetics can be defined as a dialectical space of articulation between the sensuous and the ethico-political, instead of being a separate sphere, a compartment to be excised from the worldliness of perception and history.

An aesthetic of non-synchronism also identifies a specific quality of what Marx, in an influential Nota Bene included in his *Grundrisse*, qualified as the “uneven development” of cultural and economic forms (see conclusion of this volume). At a certain moment in time, Marx noted, a given society features cultural elements from previous historical formations that survive notwithstanding a changed economic structure. Cultural elements, non-synchronously, are hence able to exceed and survive the era that originated them in the first place. When a cultural element from a different age survives in the present, a non-synchrone reality emerges by the combination of socio-economic conditions and superstructural forms carrying with themselves residual structures of feeling. This dislodgement of cultural and material forms gives rise to a specific experience of time: the aesthetic mediation of non-synchronism inhabits the work of combination of diverging temporal trajectories derived from the uneven development of culture and society. As Georg Lukács writes in a classic essay on Marxist aesthetics, “historical materialism recognizes that ideological development does not move in a mechanical and predetermined parallel with the economic progress of society” (Lukács 1978, 66). In this context, a Marxist aesthetics is an active registration of the uneven development of artistic form as integral part of a social whole, indicating how the literary representation engages with “the reality of the pulsating life of phenomena of which it forms an organic part and out of whose particular experiences it evolves” (78).

The logic of uneven development emerges today particularly strongly in the periphery of the world economy, where pre-capitalist structures of feeling combine with the most advanced effects of imperialist, neoliberal and financial capitalism. World literature hence turns the aesthetic into a testimony of the production of uneven temporalities through
the expanded logic of accumulation. Concretely, the aesthetic of non-synchronism may appear as a bridge between, on the one hand, textual devices such as prolepsis, digression, embedded narrative, analepsis and peripeteia and, on the other hand, the wider contextual references characterising the onset of capitalism and its modulations of a peripheral historical consciousness. The “aesthetic” quality addressed in this research captures the way in which stylistic or formal elements of narrative are charged with multiple historical, political and social dimensions unravelling aspects of capitalism’s worldwide expansion. In this context, “registration” does not simply equate literary realism or a mirror of nature. Rather than being a nominalistic question about form, the non-synchronic work of registration captures an epistemological space wherein the temporal order of literary expression is opened up to material entanglements in the concrete worlds of history and politics. Registration is the range of variations of historical experience; it defines the way literary works reframe social reality by revealing deeper temporal structures at the heart of capitalist modernity.

WReC’s thought-provoking views suggest a new possibility for reimagining the work of criticism without driving literature into being a mirror of reified cultural essence or just a sign of the commodification of everything. World literature discloses a new ground for analysis that goes beyond the jargon of identity politics and the reduction of literature to global cultural industry or marketplace, refusing to enclose literature in a separate space of circulation parallel to other kinds of determination. Rather, literature is an active, productive way of keeping track of history, a channel of translation and communication athwart a world dominated by the logic of capital. From this point of view, artistic representations of modernity need not be necessarily seen as gesture of resistance of few selected authors, but rather as a creative archive of a global material frame of reference. The value of WReC’s instance lies in their proposal of a notion of world literature as a method and a new critical space: behind any stylistic choices, political manifestoes and sense of cultural belonging, all literature produced in the era of modernity is, to some extent, a record of the expansion of capitalism. Methodologically, the ability to register the world system cannot be restricted to a question about formal qualities or techniques, nor does it reflect a merely thematic or documentary aspect: related concepts of peripheral modernism (Parry), peripheral realism (Cleary) and “irrealism” (WReC and Löwy) express in different ways a common aesthetic of non-synchronism. Furthermore, the world
system cannot be merely seen as a new “context” for literary works, which would replace canonical ways of situating literature in terms of nation, class, race and gender. All these modes of contextualising can indeed be compatible with the statement concerning world literature’s ability to register the uneven experience of modernity. The question of “registering” cannot be pigeonholed in traditional critical idioms: it is neither a context nor a formal technique; neither a position nor a position-taking; neither a theme nor a form of cultural identification. In its aesthetic dimension, world literature makes possible an experience of time that registers the complex realities of an age of capitalist globalisation.

In contrast to the essentialism of identity politics and the ideologies of postcolonial disjuncture, the epistemological space unlocked by the paradigm of world literature emphasises the possibility of formulating a holistic vision of the global effects of capitalism. While modern literary works and authors should not be seen as necessarily opposed to capitalism, the critical project of world literature is unequivocally anti-capitalist and grounded in the Marxist tradition. Indeed, a systemic view of world literature as record of capitalist modernity can be seen as a contemporary way of countering what Marxist critic Georg Lukács, in his important study of the concept of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, called the “atomisation” and fragmentation of life proper to the capitalist order of things. In a capitalist society, wrote Lukács, consumer articles “no longer appear as the products of an organic process within a community” but rather “as isolated objects the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculation. Only when the whole life of society is thus fragmented into isolated acts of commodity exchange can the ‘free; worker come into being” (Lukács 91). This transition, which amounts to the onset of what Marx defined as the “real” subsumption of life to capitalism, is a tendency inherent to capitalism as an engulfing and totalising system. However, the reality of global capitalism at the peripheries shows that reification remains an ongoing process and tendency rather than a finished state of being. As Sandro Mezzadra (2011b; Mezzadra and Rahola 2006) notes, postcolonial capitalism involves the constant reactivation of so-called primitive accumulation, whereby capitalism clashes with earlier social formations not fully subsumed: financial and neoliberal logics hybridise with feudal remnants, slavery and bonded labour. The systemic orientation of the concept of world literature is an explicit challenge to capitalism’s reifying tendency: it is an attempt to recover a point
of view encompassing the global workings of the system and the living, social relationships underlying the production of objects and texts.

The concept of non-synchronism is an attempt to construct a sense of the dialectical unity and interrelationship of the different times that compose a capitalist modernity, explicitly set against the atomisation, dissonance, anachronism and discontinuity that express symptomatically the reifying tendency of capitalism. As Edward Said commented in his essay, “History, Literature and Geography,” the reification of everything under the rule of capital affects the experience of time as well, introducing a sense of discontinuity and fragmentation, as Said remarks: “in the modern world it is the problem of temporality, that ironic sense of transcendental distance between subject and object lodged at the very heart of existence” (Said 460). Said’s and Lukács’s influential analyses echo Henri Lefebvre’s important essay on modernity, where he also describes the condition of modernity as one characterised by a profound atomisation and discontinuity: “with the new period comes an upsurge of discontinuity, slow but overpowering, influencing knowledge, behaviour, and consciousness … Discontinuous structures and distinct units are found everywhere: atoms, particles, genes, linguistic elements, phonemes and morphemes, and so on” (Lefebvre 179). If literary studies are an expression of the consciousness of material conditions of existence, an atomising and isolating emphasis on disjunctive identities is at risk of replicating the cultural hegemony of capitalism instead of exposing and denouncing it. Yet, at the same time, world literature’s accent on totality and system does not neglect the question of difference and does not result in flattening the history of global modernity into derivation or repetition. Far from reducing everything to a monologic reiteration of the same, the idea of a singular modernity feeding into the discourse on world literature offers a productive tool for assembling, connecting and transmitting different historical experiences. From this point of view, world literature is a mode of cultural representation that builds on the possibility of cultural transmission and translatability in order to grasp the multifarious declinations of the modern and its attendant registration in literary and artistic expression.

As Benita Parry puts it in an important essay on the fictions produced in the context of peripheral modernity, “by juxtaposing rather than serializing past and present, these fictions reflect empathetically on those memories that animate the capacities of oppressed peoples who … fashion
new and historically informed forms of consciousness replete with reverberations of rediscovered histories” (Parry 2006, 21). Beyond disjuncture, difference and hybridity, WReC’s idea of world literature has to do with the question of how different temporalities co-inhabit the unifying time determined by the accumulation of capital, and how literary works define new aesthetic modes that transmit and signify the persistence and constant re-discovery of the past in the global present. On the one hand, world literature offers a salutary critique of the tendency to place peripheral experiences of modernity in temporalities other than the present, as if life beyond the capitalist centre belonged to a different historical phase to be overcome in a pre-given and teleological grand narrative. In this context, world literature’s systemic drive challenges what anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness” proper to epistemic devices of “allochronism” (meaning literally “other time”). In his influential intervention in debates in anthropology, Fabian denounced the ethnographic prejudice distancing the time of the anthropologist (modern, “Western”) from all other non-modern temporalities encountered during ethnographic fieldwork. Fabian defines “denial of coevalness” as follows:

By that I mean a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse. What I am aiming at is covered by the German terms gleichzeitig and Gleichzeitigkeit. The unusual coeval, and especially the noun coevalness, express a need to steer between such closely related notions as synchronous/simultaneous and contemporary. I take synchronous to refer to events occurring at the same physical time; contemporary asserts co-occurrence … Coeval … covers both (“of the same age, duration or epoch”). (Fabian 31, emphases in the original)

Against the “allochronic” habit of putting other “non-modern” peoples into times different from the present, Fabian encourages an acknowledgement of the fact that the subjects of ethnographic study share the same time with the ethnographer; they are coeval and actively co-produce the same present.

On the other hand, this account risks reducing the anthropological encounter to a matter of synchronism, without accounting for the uneven and heterogeneous temporality that informs a global modernity. The recognition of coevalness should not imply a conflation of the diverse
historical experience of modernity and, most importantly, the inequality that characterises the violent expansion of capitalism on distant corners of the earth. The time of modernity engendered by capitalism is not entirely homogeneous or limited to what Pheng Cheah describes, in his influential book on world literature, as “the synchronisation of clocks … a synecdoche for European colonial domination of the rest of the world … a form of imprisonment that smothers lived local temporalities” (Cheah 1). The temporal order of a capitalist age should include but not be limited to the processes of unification and coordination of clocks described by Jonathan Martineau, Vanessa Ogle and Peter Galison in their important studies (Galison 2000; Martineau 2015; Ogle 2015). The thesis of my project is that capitalism’s time goes beyond the synchronic, empty, homogeneous and tautological time of clocks: rather, the global process of accumulation entails a proliferation of temporalities that are reconfigured through the creation of surplus value and the organic composition of capital. The past and the future become non-synchronous heterotemporalities or allochronisms only when they are incorporated in the subsumptive logic of capital. As Perry Anderson shows in his critique of Marshall Berman’s great book on modernity, All That Is Solid Melts into Air, “Marx’s own conception of the historical time of the capitalist mode of production as a whole was … a complex and differential temporality, in which episodes or eras were discontinuous from each other, and heterogeneous within themselves” (101, emphasis in original). In The Politics of Time, Peter Osborne expands on this but also critiques Anderson for failing to raise the question of modernity as a specific form of historicity. Intriguingly, Osborne notes that modernity involves “the idea of the non-contemporaneousness of geographically diverse, but chronologically simultaneous, times” (16, emphasis in original). Osborne’s remarks help distinguishing the question of historicity and historical time from the problem of periodisation and chronology. Historicity, indeed, involves addressing the social experience of time through the phases of the accumulation of capital rather than establishing a set of dates. As Sami Khatib asks, in an important essay on time: “how are we to historicize capitalism’s own mode of historicization by constructing a materialist concept of time, which is based on a non-relativist, truly universal concept of history devoid of any falsely universal, teleological, or metaphysical concepts?” (47, emphasis in original). The question opened by world literature hence concerns the possibility of keeping multiple historical
times together in the continuing reactivation of so-called primitive accumulation, recognising their contemporaneity without reducing them to the experience of the viewer or the critic. World literature frames the issue of modern historicity as coeval and multiple at the same time. Uneven historical experiences constitute the present and simultaneously dislocate it; they cannot be reduced to disjunctions but should not be flattened into a unidirectional flow of development. The concept of multiple historical experiences concurring, at the same time, within the chronology of modernity involves addressing the stakes of world literature through the formulation of a notion of historicity that is neither teleological nor disjunctive.

2 Non-synchronism: Dialectics of Time

In order to address the question of the differential historicity of a singular modernity, WReC refers to the influential and oft-mentioned concept of the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” as elaborated by Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch. In a pivotal 1932 essay titled “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” Bloch referred to the situation of Germany in the 1930s as the epitome of a “modern” social formation in which multiple times coexist side by side. Germany at that time was, according to Bloch, a still incompletely capitalist society in which previous economic and social forms survived. In a vital moment of his essay, Bloch summarises his perspective as follows:

Germany in general, which did not accomplish a bourgeois revolution until 1918, is, unlike England, and much less France, the classical land of nonsynchronism, that is, of unsurmounted remnants of older economic being and consciousness. Ground rent, large landed property and their power were rather completely integrated into the capitalistic economy and its political power in England, and in a different way, in France … The “unequal rate of development” … existed here long enough on the material level alone and hindered in this way the clearly dominating influence of capitalist thinking in the hierarchy of economic powers, that is, synchronism. (Bloch 29)

The main argument proposed in Bloch’s essay is that the survival of untimely, non-synchronous elements in German society during the 1930s could offer an explanation for the rise of fascism in Europe. Indeed, these residual elements were channelled into ideologies of a return to