

# NEONOMADISM

*ON THE*

*GLOBALISATION OF CULTURES*

*AND THE SHAPING OF*

*TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES*

**ROBIN BHATTACHARYA**

BA FINE ART – NEW MEDIA  
FINAL THESIS

CHELSEA COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN  
UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON

## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

### x. Introduction

### I. Layered Identities

Transnationals - The Children of Migrations

### II. Homogenisation or Hybridisation? Different

Theories of Globalisation

### III. Cultural Globalisation in:

#### 1. Fashion

Hip-Hop, Gangstas and the Hoodie

#### 2. Film

From Bollywood to Moulin Rouge

#### 3. Language

Dyke, Nigga, Paki

### IV. Building the fence...

“Us” and “Them”

### v. ... and tearing it down

Global Cultures as a Rhizome of Languages

### vi. Conclusion

### xx. Bibliography

## Introduction

The increased economic globalisation at the beginning of the millennium has as a consequence the globalisation of the planet's cultures. As humans are, voluntarily or not, interacting on the same world market, the awareness of the other participants/competitors is heightened and so already leads to identification or confrontation with persons apparently belonging to culturally different spheres.

Due to the modern telecommunication-technologies, people are more aware than ever about the lives in another country or continent<sup>1</sup>.

And as always since the beginning of time, certain persons are trying – be it for political, economic or socio-cultural reasons – to cross from one nation-state to another, from one cultural realm and social network to a new one, and some of them succeed.

These movements of people are heavily influencing our understanding of cultural identity, in one way or the other: Be it by opening up our idea of what a culture is and thus leading to a multicultural understanding of society, or by forcing right-wing populist politicians to delineate where a specific nation-culture starts and ends.

Similarly, Migrants have to position themselves within two or more divergent cultures, either by finding a balance in between them or by

---

<sup>1</sup> And especially about the lives in Europe and the USA or at least of a certain televised version of that reality

clearly choosing one's personal cultural identity and trying to live by that alone.

The Globalisation of goods and services allows for cheaper air-travel and therefore we can currently see a new phenomenon appear: As it is possible and increasingly affordable to fly from one cultural sphere to another once or several times a year<sup>2</sup>, it becomes more common to base one's identity not in one place alone, but in a number of countries, cities and cultures

This leads to the question of what other forms of identification remain, once past a reductionist national view of what culture is.

Music and Fashion (Hip-Hop), Literature (On The Road) and Film (Moulin Rouge, Easy Rider), can just as much be a constituent of identity, as is religion or often even plain social conditions and economic needs (Proletarian/Working Class culture).

We do not need the artificial construct of the nation in order to have a culture and retain our collective identities – To the contrary: Only understanding the complexity of what makes us who we are, can make us stay so, even in changing times.

Much rather, a more dynamic and flexible approach to culture is the only way to retain old traditions, by appropriating them and keeping them relevant in new contexts. Once past a restrictive national view,

---

<sup>2</sup> ...coupled with the de-regulations of the job-market and today's more flexible life-plans...

we see that cultures come to life the moment they are ‘inhabited’, used by a new generation and put into inter-play with its surroundings.

It is when confronted with a *differance*, faced with an ‘other’ and engaging with it, that a culture can be defined as a ‘self’ and becomes an entity of its own.

But no one culture can be totally separated from the others, as all share common roots and are now infinitely intertwined in what is a *rhizome* (Deleuze/Guattari, 80, p.3) of global cultures and languages in a perpetual exchange with each other.

It is in order to make sense of one’s self in such a globalised society, that ‘neo-nomads’, children born into tracks of migration and in-between two or more worlds, shape new transnational identities, which push the boundaries of known cultural spheres and create hybrid global cultures.

# I. Layered Identities

## The Children of Migrations

In an article about a conference in Rabat on the theme of ‘Migration and Religion in a Globalized World’, the Geneva newspaper Le Temps reported:

*“Me, Chinese from Boston, living in Paris’ –*

*A new type of migrants has arrived. After the traditional immigrants that abandon their land of origin to install themselves in a new country, by giving up their previous lives, more and more men and women are following more complex routes, going back and forth between multiple places.*

*Supported by the democratisation of air-travel and the development of telecommunication technologies, they pass from one horizon to another, without ever really leaving one. Plenty enough to have attracted the attention of demographers and sociologists, they now have a name: the transnationals.*

...

*The phenomenon is already not marginal anymore and looks set to expand, as it is linked to the current developments in the world, i.e. the globalisation.”*

Obviously the concept of multiculturalism and the related layered construction of identity is in itself not new at all – it was only marginalised in the last centuries since the French Revolution, due to pre-eminence of the then-new idea of the nation-state, consisting of one geographical territory, one language and one culture.

But already Alexander the Great shocked his Greek citizens by adopting the Persian title of ‘King of Kings’ and letting the Egyptians refer to him as ‘Pharao’. Embracing these foreign cults that seemed to contradict the Hellenic democratic tradition angered some of the more conservative Greeks, but proved to be the only way to avoid civil war within his short-lived empire.

Later the Romans regularly imported the gods (in form of their respective statues) of conquered people, so as to prove their power over them – but also in the belief that, in case the gods might wield power themselves, they would be benign to the new rulers.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in A.D. 476, Greek philosophy and especially the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle, were mostly forgotten in Europe. Arab and Jewish philosophers like Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Moshe ben Maimon and Ibn Gabirol kept the classical tradition alive<sup>3</sup> until its rediscovery by the West in the Renaissance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Benhabib, p.24

All through the 20<sup>th</sup> century the idea of a homogenous culture was contested by artists and writers who felt they have more than one nationality, although that was usually accompanied by a deep distress, due to their difficulties integrating in their society/societies.

Like Thomas Mann in the final chapter of his 1913 book *Tonio Kröger*: From his northern hometown Lübeck, to which he returned on holiday, the main character Tonio writes to his Friend Lisaweta back in the southern metropolis Munich, where he has lived for the past years. Analyzing the different characters of his German father, “*you know, [he] was of a Nordic temper: observant, thorough, correct out of Puritanism, and his mother of uncertain exotic blood, beautiful, sensitive, naïve, at the same time negligent and passionate and of an impulsive sloppiness*”, he comes to the conclusion: *I stand between two worlds, am not at home in any and therefore have a bit of trouble.*”

More subtle, a similar feeling of being *in-between-worlds*, is found in the almost biblical opening lines of Albert Camus’ *Le premier homme* (The First Man), 1960/1994: Across a wild and windy, *geologically anonymous*<sup>4</sup> landscape, a “*wagon [is] rolling along a stony road*” driven by an Arab and sitting next to him, “*a Frenchman about thirty ... of medium height, stocky, with a long face, a high square forehead, a strong jaw, and blue eyes*. In the back, *wedged between the first seat and a heap of old trunks and furniture*, is the mother, who has *a gentle look and regular features, a warm gaze in her brown eyes, a small straight nose, and the black wavy hair of a Spanish woman*.” The “*small four-year-old*

---

<sup>4</sup> according to manuscript side-notes



*boy ... leaning against her*” is the autobiographical novel’s main character, who will spend the length of the story searching for his family roots.

Maybe it is not a coincidence that the scene is of a moving vehicle, the very location of the narrative being one in transit – It is a perfect example of the famed beatnik feeling of *on the road*, as described in Kerouac’s book of the same name and which was later absorbed by the hippie-movement and found its exemplification for the mainstream in the 1969 movie *Easy Rider*.

Allowing explicitly for encounters, it is by default ready to engage in an exchange with ‘others’. As the self is not a rigid one it is open for variations of the route it takes and therefore able to go onto unthreaded paths. At times with novel combinations of passengers on board, leading again to an entirely different voyage.

A moving ‘home’, a ‘self’ in permanent transit, is probably the most fitting image for a nomadic cultural identity.

And the tracks left behind, across old trails and faraway roads, leave maps of an infinitely vast, because always renewed, network of ways or cultures.

## II. Homogenisation or Hybridisation?

### Different Theories of Globalisation

Ever since entering into the general discourse, (cultural) globalisation has been contested by different theoretical models. According to Diane Crane, there are four conceptual models of globalisation theory: Cultural imperialism theory, cultural flows/networks, reception theory and cultural policy strategies.

They can be further simplified into two general directions: The theory of global homogenisation, due to the cultural imperialism of a few multinational media corporations, and the opposing idea of a worldwide hybridisation, as different cultures get mixed up to form a diversity of new combinations.<sup>5</sup>

Currently a vast amount of the world's cultural production is owned by six media conglomerates<sup>6</sup>, which hold the copyrights to music, literature, films and TV programmes, as well as many other forms of manifestation of the mainstream commercial culture (i.e. 'merchandise'). As a consequence of their hold on the majority of media outlets, they can control what gets access to the general public and thus make it extremely hard for any outsider to penetrate the market. These corporations are also the only ones to have the necessary capital to establish themselves in newly emerging markets or to buy out the national, regional or local competition.

---

<sup>5</sup> These models correspond to the economic theories of globalisation and the popular political ideologies derived from them, like the neo-liberal free-market model and the so-called 'anti-globalisation' movement.)

<sup>6</sup> AOL Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi Universal (2001 – Mediachannel.org)

Such is the case with MTV: A part of Viacom and broadcasting in 164 countries, it offers what is called an *integrated service*: Not only does the station decide what is seen on TV and can become the next hit-single, but it then also profits from revenues of the records sold, licensing fees of the songs played on the radio and ringtones downloaded to mobile phones. Therefore, while it claims that “*each MTV channel promotes local cultural tastes with a mixture of national, regional and international artists along with locally produced and globally shared programming*”<sup>7</sup>, it is obvious that this is only the case as long as the artists are associated with the company and generate revenue for it. Which leads to a standardized global consumer culture, as the vast majority of the programming still is Anglo-American pop music.

Localization and specification in mass-media happens only in defining ‘target markets’ “*that can each be addressed by specific marketing strategies -one for gay Latino males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, another for Chinese-American teenage girls, and so forth.*” (Hardt/Negri, 2000, p.21) But in these instances the hybrid population-segments are simply treated as groups of consumers and if ever they are encouraged to participate, it is to propel the sales of branded products.

On the other hand, reception theory says that while media conglomerates can control *what* we see and hear, nobody can control *how* we see and hear it and our reaction to it. Our cultural background determines our perception of the world and so makes any content dependent of the context in which it is presented.

---

<sup>7</sup> MTV Global website

Even if we are all exposed to the same MTV Hip-Hop music videos, it does not at all mean that we try to emulate them 1:1. Instead, some main elements are absorbed and re-combined with whatever is the local culture and the end-result is again an entirely new, remixed cultural product.

This new, hybrid (Hip-Hop track or scene) may again be spread around the globe and lead to a third and a fourth generation copy – as flow and network theory claims. If this happens several times and crosses-over into other cultural production lines, it becomes impossible to say, where exactly the idea originated and a truly multicultural artwork is realised.

In the words of Hardt and Negri in 'Empire', p.45: *"The differences of locality are neither preexisting nor natural... Globalisation, like localisation, should be understood instead as a regime of production of identity and difference, or really of homogenisation and heterogenisation."*

Of course, according to the logics of capital, markets are ever expanding and seek to turn all of culture into commodities that can be bought and sold in order generate profit. Globalisation permanently protrudes so as to discover and include new territories.

But the very infrastructure created to sustain this growth (from trains to planes, from the internet to mobile phone networks), is the same infrastructure we navigate and use to live our culture and shape our

identity – and as we inhabit and use it, cultures are filled with new life again and so can escape the capitalist logic of commoditisation, by forming new relations with other cultures, languages and traditions.

### III. Cultural Globalisation in:

#### 1. Music & Fashion – Hip-Hop, Gangstas and the Hoodie

From South Central, Los Angeles to Brixton, London, from the Bronx, New York to St. Denis, Paris and from Marzahn, Berlin to Mogadishu in Somalia, in every impoverished urban area there are gangs of young males hanging around, wearing baggy trousers and pullovers with hoods and listening to Hip-Hop music.

What started off as codes of conduct among young African-Americans, like the slagging off of an opponent by a slew of fast-paced words, quickly evolved to Rap and, together with the corresponding clothing-styles and visuals (Graffiti), became established as a culture in its own right – Hip-Hop.

Although it has a birthplace and -time, it is a culture that is not bound to any territory, as it is not a native American culture, but one born to a black minority, out of its cultural marginalisation by the dominant white upper-classes.

Therefore it has a special position to start with and probably that is one reason for Hip-Hop's extraordinary worldwide success and the multitude of its local expressions. The French-language rap of IAM is just as popular in France, as the German lyrics of Die Fantastischen Vier are in Germany and Articolo 31's tracks in Italy. Each rap in their own mother-tongue, but they all wear the same baggy clothes and distinguish their social position and/or attitude by the amount of *bling* (jewellery) they carry.

But the same flexibility that allows the appropriation of Hip-Hop by many minority scenes is also what makes it so easily exploitable by the above-mentioned media corporations. As it is not political per-se and void of any message other than that of personal self-expression, it can be filled with almost any meaning desired.

Either creating socially engaged rap by using critical lyrics like Public Enemy, NWA, Eminem – or by filling it with purely commercial entertainment content to maximise sales-profits, as do Will Smith (Sony/Universal) and Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Combs (Time Warner).

A similar development could be seen in what is known as *punk*. Whereas the movement in its original form in London was a rather short-lived trend, the punk-culture in its wider sense spread around the world and morphed into various sub-genres. Ranging from the Grunge-music that emerged in the 90s in Seattle with bands like Nirvana, to hard-core and black-metal scenes, which are still popular in Italy and Scandinavia, punk was instrumental in creating not just musical styles, but with its rebellious philosophy, paved the ground for entirely new cultures that derive from it.

In the years since the turn of the millennium, it is in Beijing, China, that a new punk-rock scene is emerging. And through its appropriation of punk fashion and combining it with its own technological traditions, Japan became the home of cyber-punk culture.



*Beijing Punk Rocker*

Just as is the case with Hip-Hop, punk has also lent itself to any commercial enterprise willing to incorporate it. Even its anti-establishment attitude and ideas of refusal could be absorbed by the industry ever since entering haute couture with the fashion designs of Vivienne Westwood.

The slogan for the 2002 advertising campaign of Diesel clothing was: *"Action! This is a wake-up call for the rebel inside you. Seize the day! If you want to live a successful life you have to fight for it."* This was accompanied by imagery of models dressed in the company's clothes and posing as protesters by holding placards with apolitical messages like *"Respect Your Mom"*, *"Love Your Neighbour"* or *"The World Needs More Love Letters"*.

And in the spring of this year the UK store-chain Selfridge's & Co. launched the 'Future Punk' season, with a concert by The Buzzcocks and fanzine workshops, all to promote sales of the punk-like styled clothing and accessories by brands including Givenchy, Chloe and Fendi.



### III. Cultural Globalisation in:

#### 2. Film – From Bollywood to Moulin Rouge

The film-industry of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in India is the biggest in the world, producing more than a thousand major feature films a year, which are particularly popular in Asia, parts of the Middle East, northern Africa and recently even among certain demographics in Europe.

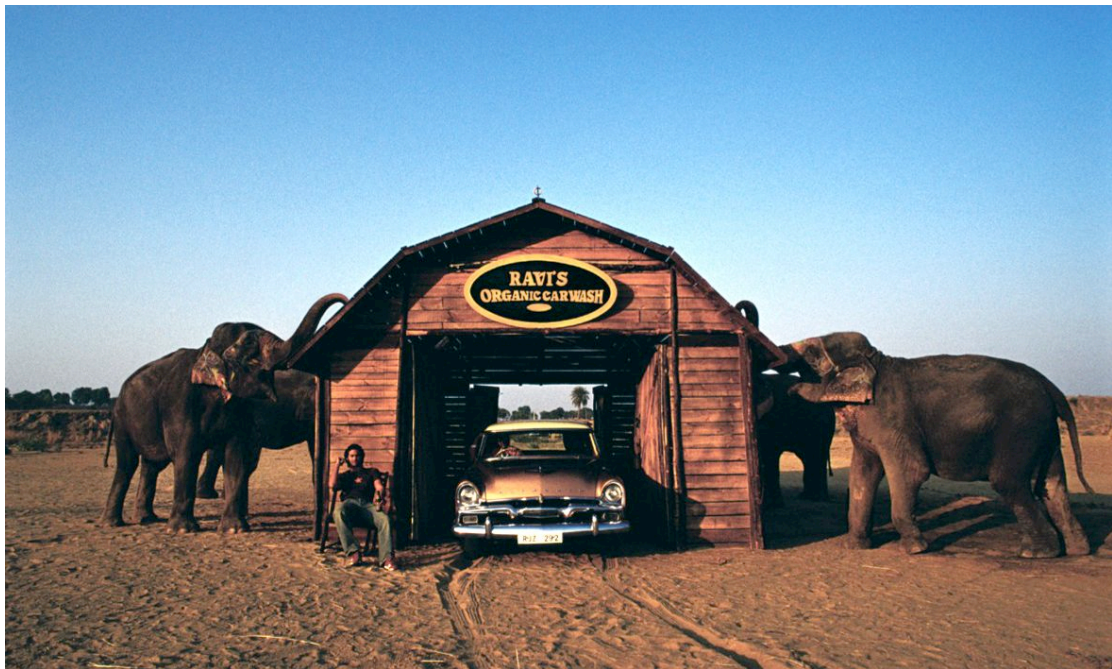
Its typical kitsch song and dance routines, traditionally reminiscent of 1950s American musicals, nowadays combine elements of classical Indian dance with contemporary western styles from music videos.

Their international success led Hollywood director Baz Luhrman to implement these elements into the 2001 movie *Moulin Rouge*. The performance of Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman borrows heavily from the sub-continent's tradition, when they suddenly break into the same song and support dancers come out of nowhere. Also the chosen colour scheme, with bright lights and stark contrasts, is a mixture of French cabaret and Bollywood-movie atmosphere.

This is an example of how the reception of different cultures feeds into mainstream entertainment products – even if the influence is superficial, it demonstrates the creation of new transnational cultural styles.

The same applies to advertising: In 2003 Cobra Beer launched a TV-commercial showing a carwash in the middle of a desert that uses elephants splashing water out of their trunks to rinse a dirty Cadillac.

The campaign's press release says: *"Produced in Jaipur, Rajasthan, India over a period of 10 days, ... The 10, 30 and 60-second commercials are a result of a collaboration between London-based Saatchi and Saatchi; renowned Indian director Shamin Desai; Highlight, India's leading production company; an English cameraman; and an Indian cast and crew of approximately 30 people."*



*Image on press release of Cobra beer 2003 TV-ad campaign*

The typical Bollywood soundscape and lighting is combined with the iconic American road-movie setting and twisted with British irony, to create a 'coolness' that crosses national styles.

But obviously such international collaborations do not happen solely because a brand wants to establish for itself a more multi-cultural image – As the ad's producers admit in an interview with BBC Business News, doing the shooting in India with a crew working at local rates, allowed for a massive reduction in costs.

As cultures merge and people move, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attribute certain cultural products and their characteristics, be it in film or otherwise, to a single nation or region.

This is most evident with large-scale productions originating from the US film-industry, but realised by a team of hundreds people from all over the world and funded by multi-national media-corporations. So it is impossible to prove whether 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' is an Asian movie or not, and to define what exactly it is that makes 'Brokeback Mountain' American, apart from the actors and where the story is set (both directed by Ang Lee, a Taiwanese living in the US).

And some 'Hollywood' blockbusters more critical of US policies, like 'Lord of War' (by Andrew Niccol, 2005), which has the international arms-trade as its subject, are almost entirely financed by Europe-based investors.

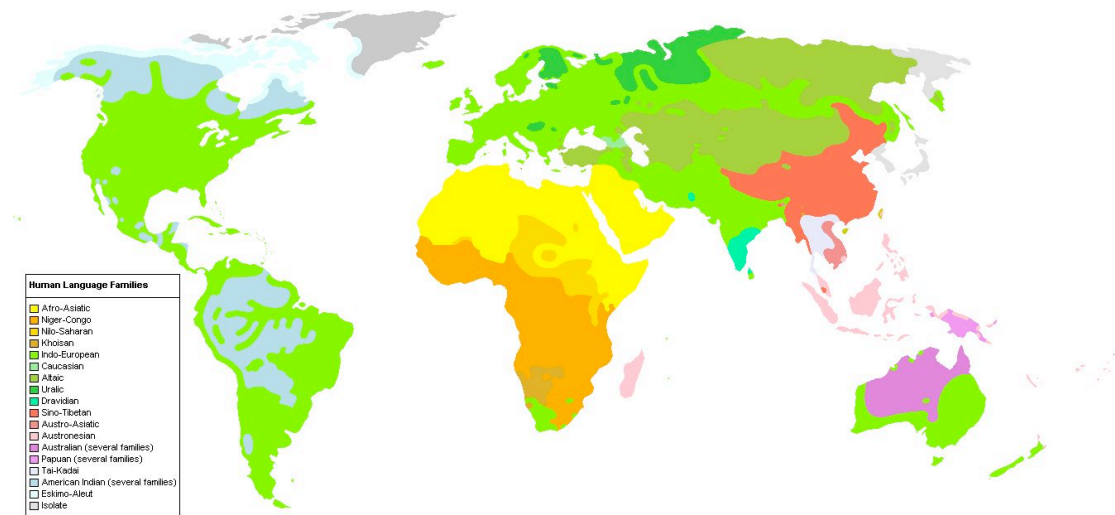
### III. Cultural Globalisation in:

#### 3. Words – Dyke, Nigga, Paki

Language is one of our most flexible cultural identifiers, as it is not dependent from any physical form. While it can be fixed in a book, the words and sentences we use to communicate with each other every day are constantly evolving.

That also makes for language's extreme diversity – a diversity betrayed by the usual simplistic categorisation in language families, dialects and sociolects. In fact, the first ever victim of nationalism was a language: With the introduction of *French* as the French national language, the other French language, the *langue d'oc*, was lost.

What constitutes the language specific to a certain culture, can be defined either by a national body like the Academie Française (French), a supra-national one like the Duden Foundation (German) or an independent organisation like the Oxford English Dictionary. But the fact that these institutions all have to regularly update their rulings, sometimes leading to great controversy and confusion –as with the last major grammar-shift of German in the years 1996-2004, which has still not been fully implemented, due to resistance by some publishers and writers– underlines the dynamic way in which words and grammar grow and evolve.



In reality, spoken and written language has much more nuances and variations, than what is defined as officially correct: A village can have it's own way of pronunciation; a scene its specific vocabulary and many families have words which only they can understand.

Also, words can completely change their meaning depending on the context. The significance of a single word can change into its direct opposite, if uttered by a different person. That way the insult 'Nigger' became a fraternising expression when said from one black person to another black person. Appropriation of the ruling language is a way to evade the humiliating character of it – The same happened with the (originally) insulting 'Dyke' for a lesbian and 'Paki' for a British citizen of Pakistani descent, which are now both internally used by the respective groups as way of self-distinction, while retaining the negative character when pronounced by outsiders.

## IV. Building the fence...

### “Us” and “Them”

Explaining which sign stems from what signifier and what it stands for in within the cultural mish-mash that is our reality – or analysing cultural products with any method, for that matter – brings with it an important problematic: By doing so, even with the aim of underlining their inter-connectedness, one automatically perpetuates the idea of a culture being an autonomous whole.

This betrays the inner complexities of all human traditions and narrations – we only can identify *them* as a separate entity, by separating *us* from *them*; by first taking a stance outside of a cultural realm, in order to have a more *objective* view on it. But as we all are cultural beings and citizens partaking in what is a shared global discourse, there is no such thing as an objective outside stance.

As Seyla Benhabid puts it in her book ‘The Claims of Cultures’: *“We should view human cultures as constant creations, recreations, and negotiations of imaginary boundaries between ‘we’ and the ‘other(s)’. The other is always also within us and is one of us. A self is only a self because it distinguishes itself from a real, or more often than not imagined, ‘other’.”*

A classic example for such an imagined ‘other’ is the *Orient*, as has elaborated Edward Said. What first was a term used to simply describe what lay east, where the sun rises, became *“an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities*

*thus support and to an extent reflect each other.*<sup>8</sup> The ‘West’ or ‘Occident’ (where the sun goes down) could only define itself as a geographical and cultural entity by drawing a boundary line somewhere – and thus defining all that is on the other side (of the Bosphorus) as different and foreign.

While this distinction may seem purely descriptive, it formed the ideological basis for later valuations of the ‘other’ side. And that ‘other’, the Orient, being inferior in the eyes of the Western ‘self’, it became the target for all the well-known instances of colonisation, in the name of ‘educating’ and ‘civilising’ the ‘structurally backward’ cultures.

The history and tradition of this concept is even nowadays strong enough, that the preservation of ‘Western’ culture amid ‘Oriental’ or Muslim influences due to their migrations into Europe, is a genuine concern for a number of people.

And the idea of the West as having to ‘bring’ something to the East, which it is supposedly lacking (i.e. democracy, freedom, etc.), can apparently still be used as a justification to initiate a war and invade another country.

As it always has been the case with an “other”, kings, rulers, politicians use it to demarcate their sphere of power – by defining an ‘outside’ of the reign, a fictional unity within is established.

---

<sup>8</sup> Introduction to *Orientalism*, Ed. 2003, p.5

Critics can only then be silenced by denouncing them of working for the enemy's side and citizen's rights can be abolished by declaring a state of emergency. By demanding cooperation from its people, the powerful can gain in control.

This can be by declaring to be the one and only descendant(s) of a mythical or real figure: As the Pharaohs were incarnations of Ra, the Gurus, holy Brahmins, claimed their right by being the representatives of Shiva, Kali or another god(ess).

Jews define themselves as the descendants of the people of Abraham, Moses and King David. It is with the return to the holy land as a common ideal that Jews could survive as a religion, culture and people, without having had a national territory in the real world, but also by excluding anyone with a non-Jewish mother.

Octavian/Caesar Augustus insisted on his right as heir to Julius Caesar and as a son of Jupiter so much as to kill thousands of troops who did not follow him but Marcus Antonius. Romans saw themselves as of the family of Romulus and Remus and favoured by Mars, so it was their natural duty to 'pacify' the barbaric<sup>9</sup> countries. Only by ever expanding the borders of the Empire, the Caesars' unifying rule had a purpose and the inner dissent could be silenced as a necessity for the common project that was the constant war.

The creation of the nation-states, through defining the common culture and language as mentioned in chapter one, was another form of

---

<sup>9</sup> From the Ancient Greek 'Barbaros' for anyone who's language was not Greek and therefore sounded like only saying 'barbarbar..' in Hellenic ears



inventing a unity. The concept formed the basis for many of today's nations like Germany, France and Italy. But it is also permanently put in question, as existing languages and cultures were sidelined or ignored in the process of nation-building and therefore oppressed, like for example the Basque, Flemish, Kurdish and Tamil. The concept also reaches its limits with any tradition not fitting the idea of what the *self* should be, as with transnational individuals, who belong to a *different* culture, but insist on their full rights as a national *here* as well.

The truth is, all humans originate from the African east coast and nobody knows where *our* culture started to be *ours* and when exactly the *other(s)* became distinct from *us*.



**Human migration - based on DNA-variations of the Y-chromosome**

Source: BBC

It is still a popular belief that *culture* is related to *ethnicity* and therefore somehow based on shared genes – which DNA-analysis

shows, is most probably wrong<sup>10</sup>. Instead, while there are regions on the earth, where certain genes are more common in the local population than others, these areas do not at all overlap with what we call nations or cultures, but rather show parallels to other regions, with similar climatic or geographic conditions. Meaning a man that lives high up in the Alps is more likely to have the same genes as someone in the Ethiopian mountains, than the DNA common with people living on the coast.

The colour of our skin, by the way, does not at all correspond with a genetic pattern. Except that what we refer to as *black* people, really have the widest genetic diversity – which is the proof that we all somehow migrated from Africa. (And the reason why the 10 most fastest persons on earth, and the 10 slowest for that matter, are most likely to be *black*).

But in within all this common genealogy, humans seem always keen to point out their particularities, by emphasising the cultural difference. Only by naming a *difference*, we can establish a boundary, separate off an ‘other’ to create a distinguishable ‘self’.

In a survey on national and religious constructions of belonging (Eade, 97), a number of second- and third-generation Bengalis/Bangladeshis in the east London borough of Tower Hamlets, were asked about their personal cultural identity and Luftur answered:

---

<sup>10</sup> Volker Sommer, Professor for Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of London in *Weltwoche* No. 31, 2003

*“A Bengali? Is that different to being Bangladeshi? I don’t know. Bengali, Bangladeshi – what is the difference? Being from Bangladesh will be Bengali – it is the same thing, isn’t it? Maybe it is that everyone talks about being Bengali in this area. No one says being Bangladeshi. I don’t know why – it is just something you have used from when you are small.”*

Even as cultures merge, they form a new, hybrid culture, which is in itself a ‘separate’ entity again. In the case here, the term ‘Bengali’ (which refers to the culture, rather than a nation) to characterise persons with ancestors from the Bangladesh-area, is used as such specifically in London’s East End.

This is why there is no homogenous ‘global culture’, despite all cultures sharing the same roots – if anything, the most ‘global’ culture would be the most hybrid one, formed by and representing the diversity of its components, thus allowing for the highest grade of localisation.

Just as Hip-Hop can be a cultural framework open to variations, religions or national traditions can be bended and crossed with each other to form new combinations.

Jahanara, a girl also responding to the above questionnaire, described her perception of cultural identity in the following words:

*“I don’t use Bangladeshi probably because I believe I am in a British country and I am more towards British than towards Bangladeshi sort of thing. I don’t know. I am a person who is*

*very mixed within both cultures – like Bengali and British but more towards Muslim.”*

And the authors of the survey correctly observe that: “*These comments explore the complexities associated with moving between two nation-states and not necessarily conforming to essentialist definitions of national belonging.*” The previous constituents of identity collide and the individual finds him- or herself between two traditions. But this position at the verge of cultural spheres is again a very specific particularity and becomes in itself an intertwined constituent of identity and therefore a ‘new tradition’ or neo-nomadic culture – in-between two worlds and at home only *on the road* or in a multiplicity of places.

## IV. ...and tearing it down

### Global cultures as a Rhizome of Languages

If any generalisation about the behaviour of people is an imprecise simplification, how can we look at cultures without discriminating 'others' and limiting our observations and ourselves?

Well, different cultures do exist – as I explained in part three, our planet's population holds a countless variety of forms of music, fashion, films, languages, arts and traditions. These cultural products are not all the same and are dependent from their origins and creators.

Using Derrida's definition of 'text' and extending it to the increasingly inter-relating and overlapping people on our planet, one could say that all signs of culture (music, art, etc.) are *languages*. We use them to signify to others and ourselves the identity that defines us as cultural, and therefore human, beings.

But what is it that they signify, other than what they are within themselves? Is it really possible for us to refer back to any origins, to know exactly who created something and why, just by analysing a cultural sign? Or maybe there is nothing signified and no signifier beyond that sign?

Jacques Derrida in 'Writing and Difference', p. 281, 'Structure sign and play': "...one must reject even the concept and word 'sign' itself – which is precisely what cannot be done."

Because the sign - text, art, tradition, culture - language, *does* exist, or is indeed the only thing we can assume it exists, as it is what we experience in the world (the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave).

Derrida goes on: *"For the signification 'sign' has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word 'signifier' itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept."*

Or applied to the planet's cultures, the assumption that humans can be differentiated and attributed to a *culture*, a common '*signifier*', is what must be abandoned.

As nothing is outside of the *text*, outside of the specific *con-text* or *language* one is looking at (*"il n'y a pas de hors-texte"*, Derrida), there can be no 'other' outside of the 'self'.

All there is, is the sign, the culture itself, brought alive every time its traditions are enacted – the moment we sing a song, picture a certain image or venerate a specific god, is when a culture comes into existence.

As language does not exist if it is not spoken/written/enacted, culture does not exist in a dormant state, 'outside' of what we can perceive, hidden in some subconscious. Only through using its language, we, as cultural signifiers, are creating the culture perpetually anew.

And where does the use of a language, the participation in a culture start? Probably already in the reading, listening, watching – by any interaction we engage with and so become part of the ongoing discourse that shapes the culture. In that precise instance, by partaking in the exchange of ideas and including ourselves, we are shifting its boundaries.

In that way we are all connected to the network of global cultures – Giving our attention to either this part of a story or rather that piece of art, we plug in and out of the divergent narratives that are infinitely bound together.

A model of this principle of perpetual bisection and reunification, of eternal parallels that cross each other, is the concept of the rhizome, developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in ‘A Thousand Plateaus’.

*“we enumerate certain approximate characteristics of the rhizome. 1 and 2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from a tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order.”* We can only understand another culture/language when connecting ourselves with it by drawing parallels to our experiences/words.

But at the same time, we can never systematize the other language without doing it injustice in forcing it into a binary structure. As no one culture was first, is ahead of the others or represents something totally different, we cannot draw a correct tree of their relations. *“There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language”* They

go on: *“3. Principle of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, ‘multiplicity’<sup>11</sup>, that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world. ... There is no unity to serve as pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject.” ...*

*“Puppet strings,”* (all the world’s cultural products/languages) *“as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer”* (the ‘culture’ in itself, as some kind of subconscious of a people) *‘but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions’* (all the other of our planet’s cultures/languages) *“connected to the first.”*

In this sense, we are all transnational citizens wandering along the lines of our culture and permanently crossing into others. Like a nomad gathering and collecting, we assemble the bits and pieces of culture we encounter into the identity that we have and which defines what our culture is. The ‘puppet strings’ in this model are not only what holds us in place, gives us our identity, the cultures we are attached to – but we, the agents of culture, are also the ones holding the strings, acting out the culture, perpetuating it and passing it on, thereby being the puppeteer, as well as the puppet.

And it is through us, who speak the language, who use the culture and in doing so interact with the overlapping cultures and translate each other’s meaning, that the strings are woven to a web. Simply by being

---

<sup>11</sup> Or ‘Multitude’, as it is called by Hardt/Negri



our 'self' and maintaining 'our' identity, we are developing the infinite Rhizome of cultures, which we live.

As we drive along the roads of our predecessors, re-iterate old paths and set foot on new ones, the maps of cultures are drawn while we are passing them by and head for new horizons. Dead culture can be found in museums, as a silent witness to a distant past. But real, living culture can only be encountered in an exchange with the present.

## VI. Conclusion

The globalisation of our planet has had a deep impact on our perception of what cultures are and how they relate to one another.

The increase in migrations leads to new transnational cultures and therefore to more dynamic approaches to how our identities develop.

Be it in literature, music, fashion and film – current cultural products display a wide range of influences from around the world, that intersect and overlap with each other to create global languages. While a few multi-national conglomerates are trying to concentrate the commercial cultural production in their hands, other, often highly localised, (sub-)cultures keep emerging on the edges of the mainstreams. In these culturally hybrid groups, new forms of identity develop that have a more nomadic character, as they are not dependent from one, but if any, rather from a multiplicity of geographical places and historical traditions.

While at it may still seem radical to re-think national definitions of cultures, today's process of globalisation is simply a progression in the long inter-play of diverging cultural spheres. As today's genetic research confirms, cultures do not have different roots in themselves. But rather they formed one out of the other by separating a constructed 'self' from an imagined 'other', they all have always been intertwined.

It actually is exactly in that instance of exchange, that culture really is produced – by taking one cultural position and translating it into another language, by activating a tradition the moment we partake in

it, we bring cultures alive and fill them with new meaning. Because cultures need to be seen more as languages – consisting of ‘signs’ that are activated as soon as they are used in conjunction with other signs in within a specific context.

This creates a global network, *rhizome* or *Multitude* of cultures and languages, which are each distinct but at the same time connected.

While there may be more dominant forces at work therein (media conglomerates), which seek to overpower other lines of cultural production, the non-binary dynamic structure allows to be broken open again and again. And so cultures keep escaping and thereby enlarging the market logics, by aligning with different cultural spheres to shape new hybrid, nomadic identities.

Similar to a never-ending voyage with an infinite number of fellow travellers, we go along the lines of the cultures we know, towards the ones we want to discover and on the way we map out what is in between. While reaching these places, we immediately pass them and so remain permanently *on the road*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Benhabib, Seyla; *The Claims of Culture – Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*; Princeton University Press; Princeton; 2002
- Bourdieu, Pierre; *Distinction and the Aristocracy of Culture*, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, Ed. Storey John.; Harvester Wheatsheaf; New York; 1994
- Crane, Diane (Ed.); *Media, Art, Policy and Globalization*, Routledge; London; 2002
- Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Felix; *Mille Plateaux – Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, Les Editions de Minuit; Paris; 1980; Engl. Translation: *A Thousand Plateaus – Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, Athlone Press; London; 1988
- Deleuze, Gilles; *Pourparlers*; Les Editions de Minuit; Paris; 1990; Engl. Translation: *Negotiations*; Columbia University Press; New York; 1995
- Derrida, Jacques; *Writing and Difference*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd; London; 1978
- Eade, John (Ed.); *Living the Global City – Globalization as local process*; Routledge; New York/London; 1997
- Eley, Geoff/Suny, Ronald Grigor (Ed.); *Becoming National – A Reader*, Oxford University Press, oxford/New York; 1996
- Featherstone, Mike; *Consumer Culture & Postmodernism*; SAGE Publications; London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi; 1991
- Foucault, Michel; *Les mots et les choses*; Editions Galimard; Paris; 1966; Engl. Translation: *The Order of Things*; Tavistock/Routledge; New York/London; 1970
- Gilroy, Paul; *Between Camps – Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; 2000 / Routledge; London; 2000
- Hardt, Michael/Negri Antonio; *Empire*; Harvard University Press; Cambridge, Massachusetts/London; 2000
- Hardt, Michael/Negri Antonio; *Multitude*; Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Books, New York/London; 2004
- Kempny, Marian/Jawłowska, Aldona (Ed.); *Identity in Transformation – Postmodernity, Postcommunism and Globalization*; Praeger Publishers; Westport, Connecticut/London; 2002
- King, Anthony Ed.; *Culture, Globalization and the World System – Contemporary Conditions for the representation of Identity*; palgrave & Department of Art and History, State University of New York at Binghamton; New York; 1991
- RAIN Artists' Initiatives Network; *Silent zones – on globalization and cultural interaction*; Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten; Amsterdam; 2001
- Said, Edward W.; *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd; London; 1978
- Steiner, George; *After Babel – Aspects of Language and Translation*; 1975; German Translation: *Nach Babel*; Suhrkamp Verlag; Frankfurt am Main; 1981

Newspaper & Magazine:

- Dubuis, Etienne; *Moi, Chinois de Boston vivant à Paris*; Le Temps, December 12<sup>th</sup>; Geneva; 2005 (Translation by R. Bhattacharya)
- Sommer, Volker; *Wir sind alle Afrikaner*, Weltwoche, No. 31, p. 54; Zürich; 2003

Websites:

- Guardian Unlimited – *Fashion takes on a whole new meaning*  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,796100,00.html>
- Mediachannel.org – *Media Ownership 2001*  
<http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/chart.shtml>
- Migration and Religion in a Globalized World; Rabat, Morocco, 5 – 6 December 2005;  
[http://www.iom.int/en/know/idm/mrgw\\_0506122005\\_en.shtml](http://www.iom.int/en/know/idm/mrgw_0506122005_en.shtml)
- MTV Global  
[http://www.mtv-global.com/print/print\\_mtvnetworks.htm](http://www.mtv-global.com/print/print_mtvnetworks.htm)
- Selfridge's & Co. - Future Punk  
<http://www.selfridges.com/index.cfm?page=1032&element=4993>