

## **Postmodernity, globalisation, communication and identity**

### *ABSTRACT*

This article sets out to explore what it is to live in the postmodern age as an 'individual', that is, as someone with a distinct sense of self. Consideration is given both to the possibility that individuals today, in the context of globalisation, may not have such a distinct sense of personal 'identity', and also to what it is to have an identity. These questions are explored in relation to the so-called postmodern subject – or the subject in the age of globalisation, the age of hypercommunication, or of 'informatization' – which one may assume to be constituted very differently from the 'modern' subject of the 19th-century, or even more radically differently from premodern subjects. One could say that what Hardt and Negri regard as distinctive for postmodernity – informatisation, made possible by advanced communications technology – is inseparable from the 'identity' of postmodern individuals. Moreover, Derrida's insistence that the communications technology characteristic of an era embodies a change in subjectivity (and hence, in identity), points to a significant clue regarding the identity of postmodern subjects. The aim of the present article is therefore to explore what all of these divergent considerations mean with regard to the issue of identity in the contemporary world – whether one has reason to believe that identity has evaporated in the flux of postmodern life, or if some of the theoretical perspectives invoked here enable one to affirm the continued legitimacy of talking about identity today.

## INTRODUCTION

We live in a postmodern age – this is well known today. What is less well known, however, is what it means to say this, and what this then implies with regard to the way a person experiences him- or herself as someone with a more or less distinct sense of self. This article aims at exploring what it is to live in the postmodern age as an 'individual', that is, as someone with a greater or lesser sense of identity, and to probe the role of current modes of communication in shaping such an awareness.

There are many different approaches to answering the question concerning the meaning of 'postmodern', 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism'<sup>1</sup>. In a nutshell, postmodernity is the name we give to a culture with certain characteristics that are different from 'modern' culture or 'premodern' culture. I would describe each of these as follows:

- *Premodern* culture (premodernity) is characterised by the fundamental role of mythical or religious explanations of nature and society (in short, of the universe, cosmos, or creation – terms which are not equivalent) – a strictly rational, conceptually universalising understanding of the world is absent from the premodern. Some people would say that premodern society is or was pervasively superstitious.
- *Modern* culture (modernity) is recognisable by the fact that mythical or religious explanations are replaced by predominantly rational, scientific ones, and by the differentiation of rationality itself into different 'logical' or discursive spheres (such as cognition, ethics and politics, art and technology). Through concepts attempts are made to arrive at a 'universal' understanding of nature as well as of society, and moreover, through technology (historically, the offspring of science), nature is subjected to attempts at controlling it.
- *Postmodern* culture (postmodernity) rejects the validity of attempts to universalise about nature and society, and emphasises particularity more than universality. This is why such tremendous attention is devoted to questions of diversity, difference and otherness in postmodernity (initially with critical intent, but something exploited and capitalised on by the neoliberal market today (Hardt & Negri 2001: 150-154). In addition, in postmodernity

---

<sup>1</sup> Among the many excellent texts on the phenomenon of the postmodern, some are: Lyotard, 1984; 1984a & 1995; Harvey, 1990; Hardt & Negri, 2001 & 2005; Lyon, 1994; Foster, 1985; Megill, 1985; Butler, 2002; Anderson, 1996; and Norris 1990 & 1993. Not all these authors (or the contributors to collections edited by them) are however sympathetic to postmodernity (Norris, for example), but they all contribute to an understanding of this multifaceted cultural phenomenon. Lyotard, Hardt and Negri, Harvey, and Megill, especially, provide penetrating insights into its historical and structural features. In Lyotard's case, some of the originary concepts pertaining to the ability to frame the postmodern in relation to the modern, realism, two kinds of sublimity, capitalism, 'technoscience', narrative and the global discourse of development were formulated by him. In the case of Hardt and Negri, their *Empire* and *Multitude* may be regarded as among the most significant recent (critical) publications on postmodernity and globalisation at the same time, in so far as they show convincingly that the two things cannot be separated. Where some authors are content to describe the phenomenon of globalisation, they uncover not only its multi-level functioning, but also its countervailing political aspects – aspects that are literally matters of life and death, and are critiqued by them as such.

understood historically, technology moves into the stage of electronically mediated information and communication<sup>2</sup>.

*Modernism* as well as *postmodernism* denotes critical (artistic, philosophical or literary) appropriations of modern and postmodern culture. A postmodernist literary text adopts such a critical position towards postmodern culture, but simultaneously also towards modernist literature as critical interpretation of modernity, for example<sup>3</sup>.

It is probably fair to say that postmodernity comes with the gift of being freed from modern illusions about many things, for instance the belief that there are essential, universally valid differences among races (so that a racial identity is a fate of homogeneity from which no one can supposedly escape). *But* postmodernity also brings with it the Pandora's Box of such a degree of heterogeneity (plurality of differences, or otherness) that the very possibility of having an identity – racial, cultural, sexual – becomes problematical<sup>4</sup>, especially in so far as the process of globalisation at various levels contributes to the 'circulation' of cultural identities. This may sound like a contradiction: Isn't difference, not sameness, the precondition for having an identity (otherwise everyone would be the 'same', without a distinctive identity)? Yes and No. The point is that, under certain cultural conditions, differences themselves can become a kind of sameness, such as when differences are artificially (and for ideological reasons) produced to create the illusion that everyone is not the same. The latest designer wear only differentiates the fashion-conscious, 'cool' chick or dude who wears it as long as he or she is the first to buy, and before the next 'must-have' fashion hits the stores. That is why they keep buying the latest 'stuff', of course – to keep up with 'difference'. One may wonder if such people have a sense of identity as something that distinguishes them from

---

<sup>2</sup> *In the northern hemisphere, especially in and around urban centres, postmodernity has assumed a virtually hegemonic cultural pervasiveness, keeping in mind that the modern usually continues to exist side by side with the (dominant, because of 'informatization') postmodern, as defined here. South Africa (and probably most 'developing' countries of the south) is different in this respect: although the postmodern and the modern are visibly juxtaposed in mainly the urban areas of the country, the premodern still exists alongside of it, sometimes very uneasily (even in city centres; see Olivier, 2004a). This was apparent, rather grotesquely, in the afterthought added by a provincial MEC for Safety and Security a few years ago after a number of grave-robberies had occurred, evidently for 'muti'-purposes, in the province: first he had assured listeners, in sterling 'modern' fashion, that everything was under control – the police and forensic investigators were 'on top of the case' – and then he added, in incongruous premodern mode, that the public need not worry about the efficacy of the 'muti' (human body-parts used as 'medicine'), anyway, because it has to be removed from someone's body while he or she is alive, for it to be effective! The postmodern 'condition' may therefore be seen as being exacerbated in South Africa by the simultaneous co-existence of all three cultural modes.*

<sup>3</sup> *Although not specifically referenced here, my exposition of these terms is indebted in various ways to the authors listed in Note 1.*

<sup>4</sup> *This does not mean, however, that racism disappears altogether. As Hardt and Negri (2001: 190-195) shrewdly point out, the modern variety of racism with its emphasis on supposedly essential racial characteristics, is simply replaced by a cultural version of racism with the form: There may be no essential racial features which mark the individual, but one's cultural provenance is something that cannot be escaped – once a Jew or an Arab, always a Jew or an Arab! Even more shrewdly, Žižek (2000: 5-11) observes that racism, today, manifests itself in a series of displacements – psychoanalytically speaking, the projection of one's repressed racial aversions onto 'new' racial others – disguised as the contemporary pariahs of world culture (for instance Bosnians, Slovenes or other ethnic remnants of the 'Balkan'). In so doing, Žižek demonstrates the explanatory power of psychoanalytic theory, without which no theorist or philosopher can do justice to cultural phenomena.*

others. If they have been thoroughly 'ideologised' (to coin a word) in the discourse of the market, they probably do, however misguided this may be.

One of the factors in postmodernity which exacerbates the confusion regarding ostensible social and cultural heterogeneity surrounding individuals, which seems to hide a more decisive cultural sameness (produced by the economics of globalisation) is the pervasiveness of electronic communication-networks. As Hardt and Negri (2001:280) remind one, the distinctive feature of postmodern culture is what they call 'informatization' – the fact that all facets of social life are subjected to ubiquitous information technology, which supersedes all previously decisive features of modern culture, such as industrialisation and the primacy of science. Today, science no longer sets the agenda for technology, as it did at the dawn of the historical emergence of western modernity; the relation has been reversed, and what operates at all levels, including that of communication, in society, is 'technoscience' – which, it just so happens, is also the driving force behind information technology and 'informatization' as the determining mode of economic production in contemporary culture and society.

## 1. POSTMODERNITY AND GLOBALISATION

The consequences this has for the differences that are putatively so characteristic of postmodernity, and at a further remove, for the question of identity, cannot be separated from the process known as globalisation<sup>5</sup> which, as Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard (2004: 1) point out, 'defines our era'. It is small wonder that, when surveying the thematic landscape of cultural globalisation – where the significant role of (especially multi- or transnational) media corporations in the transmission of popular culture is invariably encountered – the question, whether globalisation (now apparently inseparable from postmodernity with its hallmark structural feature of 'informatization', (according to Hardt and Negri) engenders global 'sameness' or difference, surfaces everywhere, and evokes divergent answers (Steger, 2003: 70-76). Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard (2004), for example, in the first chapter of *Globalization: culture and education in the new millennium* focus on the important issues of complexity and difference, especially in so far as these enable researchers to identify and scrutinise problem-areas concerning communication and miscommunication in education worldwide – problems that invariably require the difficult process of negotiating differences among individuals with diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Clearly, for Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard difference is not about to make way for sameness.

---

<sup>5</sup> *The extensive literature on globalisation notwithstanding, because my main focus here is on postmodernity and the question of identity (and globalisation as a process may for these purposes be treated as an aspect of postmodernity). I have found it adequate at present to make use mainly of Steger's deceptively modest introductory book (2003) on this phenomenon, partly because my argument here does not require more than his judicious bringing-together of the various strands of thinking in this field, and partly because it seems to me that I can depend more on the work of Hardt and Negri to put globalisation in perspective regarding communication and the question of identity, than I could on any of the other theorists of globalisation, such as Fredric Jameson, Anthony Giddens, Roland Robertson, Benjamin Barber, George Ritzer, Francis Fukuyama and Justin Rosenberg. The reason for this is that, although not immediately apparent, both of the major works by Hardt and Negri (2001 and 2005) are studies of, among other things, the character, effects and consequences of globalisation in the postmodern world, in addition to which their critique of it (at various levels) in relation to what they call (global) 'Empire' and 'multitude' is uncompromising. It is especially the nature of this critique, that combines Marxist and (mainly Foucaultian) poststructuralist resources, which is valuable for achieving my goal of exploring and elucidating the implications that globalisation, as one of the hallmarks of postmodernity, has for the question of identity.*

On the other hand, some theorists – those branded 'pessimistic hyperglobalizers' by Steger – insist that 'an increasingly homogenized popular culture' is emerging, one that is fired by the western, mainly American, 'culture industry' (a concept forged by Adorno and Horkheimer in their critique of 'instrumental reason') – so much so that the process of cultural colonisation of the globe is also nicknamed the 'Americanization of the world', hinting at the vulnerability of less powerful cultures to what sociologist George Ritzer also labels 'McDonaldization' (Steger, 2003: 71), or the expansion of social, economic and cultural processes modelled on the principles of fast-food restaurant management. The cultural consequences of this are succinctly stated by Steger (2003: 71): 'In the long run, the McDonaldization of the world amounts to the imposition of uniform standards that eclipse human creativity and dehumanize social relations'. Recall what I said earlier about 'designer wear' fashions imposing uniformity, rather than the diversity it claims for itself, on consumers.

The political theorist Benjamin Barber (Steger, 2003: 71-73) goes so far as to warn against the spectre of what he calls 'McWorld', which, like a global virus, is transforming the diversity of world cultures into 'a blandly uniform market'. It is unnecessary to stress the implications of this for the question of identity – if Barber and other 'pessimistic hyperglobalizers' are right, postmodern identities are becoming more homogeneous or uniform, and not – as the advent of postmodernity seemed initially to promise – more diverse. Ironically, such uniformity has nothing to do with state totalitarianism, this time (as it did once under fascism with its drab military uniforms), but with a kind of cultural and economic imperialism or neo-colonialism. And the media, with their global communicational reach, are the means for spreading these homogenising sites of identification in the shape of images (like those on MTV, on which millions of 'teeny-boppers' model their bland, soulless, ever-shifting identities). As Steger (2003: 73) puts it, elaborating on Barber's work:

Music, video, theatre, books, and theme parks are all constructed as American image exports that create common tastes around common logos, advertising slogans, stars, songs, brand names, jingles, and trademarks<sup>6</sup>.

It should be clear that these 'pessimistic' theorists of the globalising aspect of postmodern culture do not regard its homogenising effects as something in which to rejoice. By contrast, the so-called 'optimistic hyperglobalizers', while agreeing on the homogenising effect of globalisation, welcome it as a source of salutary, expanding sameness (Steger, 2003: 73-75). Francis Fukuyama, for instance, believes that the Americanisation of the world is synonymous with the global spread of the 'free market' and democracy, while other optimists (champions of cosmopolitanism rather than the vaunted superiority of a specific culture) hail the Internet as the symbol of, and the means for bringing about a globally homogeneous 'technoculture'.

Steger (2003: 75) aptly suggests, however, that the crucial question is whether all these powerful homogenising forces are capable of eradicating all the cultural diversity in the world. Clearly, some

---

<sup>6</sup> Importantly, not even political conflict can be separated from this. Steger (2003: 73) reminds one that the upshot of Barber's analysis of (American) cultural globalisation is that it provokes cultural and political resistance in the guise of 'Jihad', or the violent, reactionary response of certain cultures threatened by 'McWorld', against the symbols and representatives of this globalising force. See also in this regard Hardt and Negri's (2001: 146-150) analysis of (religious) fundamentalism as, curiously enough, a postmodern phenomenon, despite its ostensible attempt to reinstate a premodern state of affairs, as well as Kovel's (2002: xii-xiii) insistence that one should understand it in relation to the contemporary state of advanced capitalism in the world, specifically the fundamental role that the oil economy plays in this global economic system.

of the pessimistic theorists of globalisation believe that this is the case, while many of their more 'optimistic' counterparts do not seem to care much about diversity. As for myself, I tend to agree with a third group of interpreters who, pointing to evidence of new cultural forms making their appearance across the globe, claim that these arise precisely in the interaction between homogenising globalising forces and local cultural practices (Steger, 2003: 75). So, for example, the sociologist Roland Robertson has coined the term 'glocalization' (Steger, 2003: 75) to indicate the '...complex interaction of the global and local characterized by cultural borrowing'. The resulting expressions of cultural "hybridity", he continues, 'cannot be reduced to clear-cut manifestations of "sameness" or "difference"<sup>7</sup>.

It is not difficult to think of embodiments of such cultural hybridity (that is, cultural phenomena which do not fit into categories of 'purity' such as 'genuinely English', or 'authentically African', but appear to be a novel mixture of two or more cultural idioms). In addition to the examples listed by Steger (2003: 76) – '...exciting Indian rock songs...the intricacy of Hawaiian pidgin...the culinary delights of Cuban-Chinese cuisine' – one could easily think of local hybrids in the South African clothing industry (the interesting 'South African surfer' variations on the globally familiar T-shirt made at Jeffreys Bay, for example), or of peculiarly South African blends of music that bring together American, or French, British and African influences (a familiar reversal of this is American Paul Simon's musical album, *Graceland*, which benefits from the inimitable African beat of *Ladysmith Black Mambazo*, which has taught many an American what 'true' rhythm can be). Steger (2003: 75) aptly summarises the consequences of globalisation as follows, while also simultaneously pointing to a connection with the question of identity in postmodernity:

Cultural globalization has contributed to a remarkable shift in people's consciousness. In fact, it appears that the old structures of modernity are slowly giving way to a new 'postmodern' framework characterized by a less stable sense of identity and knowledge.

## 2. MODERN(ISM) AND POSTMODERN(ISM)

Returning to the main focus of this article, the first thing to remember here is that the 'postmodern' does not primarily name a specific historical epoch (although it unavoidably manifests itself historically); neither does the 'modern', even if both also apply to certain periods in western cultural history. Primarily (as Steger's use of the phrase 'less stable' in the preceding quotation suggests) these concepts denote *structural* features of culture, or – to put it differently – when one adds '-ism' ('modernism' and postmodernism') to the *critical* attributes of each. This is apparent from Lyotard's remark (1984: 79) that, '[a] work [of art] can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant', as well as from his observation, in *The inhuman* (1991: 25), that 'modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its own postmodernity'. If this comes across as being cryptic, consider that a work of art, for example, or a novel, or poem, begins as something incipient, unfinished, potentially malleable in different directions, giving birth to itself, as it were, as the artist or writer continues moulding it. This is what Lyotard identifies as the *postmodern*

---

<sup>7</sup> See in this regard Steger's (2003: 2-7) illuminating discussion of the figure of Osama bin Laden as the embodiment of cultural hybridity.

moment, which is the *modern* – i.e., the stabilised, somehow brought to 'completion', or 'finished' work or text – in its 'nascent' ('being born') state. The modern is therefore typically recognisable by the various ways in which it displays an element of being, permanence, essence, (stable) structure, unity, closure, and so on (for instance Orson Welles's modernist classic film, *Citizen Kane*)<sup>8</sup>, while the postmodern displays, in various ways, its attempt to resist or overcome stability, opting instead for a show of ephemerality, fleetingness, flux, multiplicity, open-endedness, fragmentation, porousness, the absence of the modernist 'frame', and so on (a paradigmatic example, also in cinema, being Verhoeven's postmodernist neo-noir, *Basic Instinct*)<sup>9</sup>. As any observant reader would notice, this distinction implies that modern(-ist) artists or other practitioners are no less aware of the flux of social life than are their postmodern(-ist) counterparts, the decisive difference being their attempts at arresting the flux by means of various strategies, while postmodernists accentuate or exacerbate the dynamism or flux in different ways.

From the above it should be apparent that, structurally speaking, modern(-ist) as well as postmodern(-ist) features can be detected in virtually any historical era. And indeed, it comes as no surprise to discover that the European Renaissance, together with its historical aftermath neatly matches the tensional structural features distinguished by Lyotard. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001: 70-78) refer to the Renaissance as the 'revolutionary plane of immanence', or the 'first (postmodern) mode' of an incipient modernity (a dynamic era of becoming or of a new awareness of humanity's immanent, revolutionary potential or 'desire'). The historical reaction it provoked, according to them, assumed the shape of a forcible, new, transcendent order (intent on domesticating or arresting the radically revolutionary, newly emerged, immanent forces of the Renaissance). The latter comprises the 'second (or modern) mode' of modernity – the mode that turned out to be historically triumphant at the dawn of modernity, without being able to obliterate the revolutionary, 'postmodern' moment entirely. Hardt and Negri (2001: 76) formulate it as follows in historical terms:

Modernity itself is defined by crisis, a crisis that is born of the uninterrupted conflict between the immanent, constructive, creative forces and the transcendent power aimed at restoring order. This conflict is the key to the concept of modernity, but it was effectively dominated and held in check.

What they call modernity's 'first mode' (the 'revolutionary plane of immanence') not only corresponds to Lyotard's postmodern moment, while their 'second mode' of modernity (the transcendent plane of order) has Lyotard's 'modern' as its counterpart, but also, significantly, emphasises the 'crisis'-character of the postmodern – that is, the fact that the endemically unstable, or destabilising postmodern moment imparts to contemporary culture its salient feature(s) of being plagued by perpetual, incessant 'crises' in various domains. Given the tendency, on the part of many commentators, to restrict the 'postmodern' to the domain of cultural production, it should be stressed that it includes the political and the economic – in the case of the latter, so-called neoliberal

---

<sup>8</sup> In Welles's film, the life of business and media tycoon, the eponymous Kane, is reconstructed in classic psychoanalytic mode by means of anamnesis, leading to the conclusive insight that his relentless quest for power was motivated by what his *objet petit a*, the sled Rosebud, represents, namely the premature loss of his mother, metonymically preserved in the last word ('Rosebud') he utters.

<sup>9</sup> Verhoeven's postmodernist noir not merely unsettles any attempt to establish a coherent (modernist) interpretation (which film noir does generically), but exacerbates this almost unbearably by focussing on surfaces instead of underlying motives for the action (see Olivier, 2002: 111-126), on the one hand, and by multiplying the options in 'whodunnit' terms, on the other.



economics (with its belief that the principle of 'the market' should be left free to regulate socio-economic life), and as far as politics goes, a 'left'-attitude underpinned by the belief that there is no way to isolate any social or cultural practice – painting, education, architecture, religion – from the political domain (Butler, 2002: 2).

Where does communication in the guise of 'informatization' (Hardt and Negri) fit into this rather unsettling picture, and what about the elusive question of identity? It is informative in this regard to return briefly to Steger (2003: 76), the globalisation-theorist, who has the following to say about the role of the media in the ('postmodernizing') process of globalisation:

To a large extent, the global cultural flows of our time are generated and directed by global media empires that rely on powerful communication technologies to spread their message. Saturating global cultural reality with formulaic TV shows and mindless advertisements, these corporations increasingly shape people's identities and the structure of desires around the world.<sup>10</sup>

Small wonder that Christopher Butler (2002: 3) remarks, *a propos* of the prodigious growth of media and communication networks since the 1960s (something one *might* expect to have contributed to mutual understanding among people and cultures)<sup>11</sup>:

And yet, in our new 'information society', paradoxically enough, most information is apparently to be distrusted, as being more of a contribution to the manipulative image-making of those in power than to the advancement of knowledge. The postmodernist attitude is therefore one of a suspicion which can border on paranoia.

Notably, the 'postmodernist' attitude of suspicion alluded to by Butler presupposes a critical appraisal and appropriation of the cultural practices and products surrounding consumers today. In this respect Butler echoes Lyotard's (1984: xxiv) famous dictum, pronounced in 1979, that the postmodern is characterised by an 'incredulity toward metanarratives', where such metanarratives are taken as being the hallmark of the modern attempt to back up social, scientific, economic and other behaviour by some overarching 'story' which justifies it (for example the notorious, and by now discredited modern belief in the inevitability of 'progress' towards increasing political freedom, as well as control over nature in the interest of human security and economic growth)<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> In 'Popular art, the image, the subject and subverting hegemony' (Olivier, 2006) I have attempted to come to grips with the vexing question, namely, what strategies can be used to undermine or subvert the tremendous hold of desire-invested 'branded' images worldwide on the behaviour of consumers living under conditions orchestrated by the exploitative agencies of multinational capitalism.

<sup>11</sup> See in this regard my essay, 'The (im-)possibility of communication' (Olivier, 2004b), where I make use of Derrida's deconstruction of James Joyce's Ulysses to address the paradoxical state of affairs – aggravated in postmodernity with its advanced electronic communication capabilities – where the very conditions that make communication possible, can be shown to undermine it at the same time.

<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, this illusory faith in progress was thoroughly unmasked as just that – an illusion – by both world wars, and it is striking (and not a little ironic) to hear politicians and economists talking glibly, but unconvincingly, about the need to 'move forward' on certain issues (diplomatic or economic negotiations, for instance), without ever being able to specify precisely where one has to move to! As far as 'control' over nature is concerned, the current situation is, to an even greater extent, the complete negation of what modern



### 3. HARDT AND NEGRI ON POSTMODERNITY AND GLOBALISATION

In the literature that ties the process of globalisation to postmodernity, one would go far to find thinkers who are as uncompromising in their critique of this process as are Hardt and Negri (2001 & 2005). Both these texts testify to their agreement with Lyotard that the time is past for any naïve belief in 'progress'. In the first, *Empire*, they trace the emergence of a new constellation of power ('Empire') at various levels – the economic, political, juridical, cultural and social – and tie this emergence of 'Empire' to the '...irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges' (2001: xi). Specifically, in their use of the term, it refers to a new global order or a novel form of sovereignty. 'Empire', they go on to say, 'is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world'. While they grant that, as many commentators have argued, the sovereignty of nation states has declined, this does not mean that sovereignty as such does not exist any longer. Hence the fundamental hypothesis of their book, namely, that sovereignty has assumed a new form, consisting of a series of national and trans-national structures that obey the same 'logic of rule'. This novel type of sovereignty is precisely what they call 'Empire'.

From this it should be apparent that what Negri and Hardt have in mind is nothing like the imperialisms established by modern European powers. These were essentially territory-bound in so far as nation states exercised their rule over geographically expanded domains. They point to the increasing inability of nation states to regulate economic and cultural exchanges as one of the symptoms of the advent of 'Empire'. In contradistinction to modern imperialism, however, Empire has no centre of power in a territorial sense, nor does it have any geographical boundaries. Instead, it is '...a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' (2001: xii). In contrast to the putative (but illusory) stable identities and fixed hierarchies of modern imperialism, Empire is characterised by hybrid identities and flexible hierarchies that operate hand in hand with multiple exchanges along rhizomatic global networks of power.

The advent of Empire signals a new stage in capitalist production, which goes beyond the industrial phase of production by means of factory labour, even if it still exists in reduced format. The actualisation of the world market is inseparable from it, but far from implying trade between discrete geographical territories, the spatial boundaries between First and Third World have become fluid, resulting in their continual intermingling. This has been made possible by, amongst other things, a transformation of the dominant processes of production. According to Negri and Hardt the postmodernised global economy prioritises labour of a cooperative, communicative and affective kind – which is what they describe as a process of *informatization* (2001: 280-294) – and inclines increasingly towards so-called 'biopolitical production', or '...the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another' (2001: xiii). Moreover, the informatisation of economies does not leave culture and social identities

---

*believers in progressive control over nature hoped for in the optimistic 19th century – all indications are that nature has been exploited and the environment been degraded to such an extent that there is uncertainty among some scientists concerning the timeous recovery of damaged ecosystems, even if the necessary changes in economic activity could be implemented immediately. See in this regard Kovel (2002) as well as my 'Nature, capitalism, and the future of humankind' (Olivier, 2005).*

untouched<sup>13</sup>. All those manifestations of difference alluded to earlier as featuring so prominently in theories of postmodernity and, related to these, globalisation – pertaining to culture (including art, architecture, literature, cinema and music), to race, gender, local or indigenous traditions, customs, fashions and geographies – are cast in a new light by Hardt and Negri (2001:138-143). They show that the celebration of difference or alterity is not innocent. On the contrary, the postmodernist 'politics of difference' (and its postcolonial counterpart, for that matter; see pp.143-146), despite being liberatory in situations where modern power still operates hierarchically through binary oppositions, stable divisions, and identities conceived of as essential, may be understood as being not only completely ineffectual against the practices of Empire in its global, postmodern guise, but as actively promoting such practices (2001: 142). They point out, for example, that capitalism in its globalised, globalising guise thrives on difference, something that is closely tied to the 'ideology of the world market' (2001: 150-151):

Differences (of commodities, populations, cultures, and so forth) seem to multiply infinitely in the world market, which attacks nothing more violently than fixed boundaries: it overwhelms any binary division with its infinite multiplicities...With the decline of national boundaries, the world market is liberated from the kind of binary divisions that nation-states had imposed, and in this new free space a myriad of differences appears.

It goes without saying that the endless differences – cultural, geographical, ethnic, financial or commercial - that come into view in the varied global space where the world market functions, are grist to the mill of capital. Never before has it been faced with such enormous opportunities, not least of which are those pertaining to the construction of iconic sites of identification through the cynical use of celebrities' images in advertising and branding. The pictures of film or sports stars, or the faces of glamorous models, are invaluable means for marketing commodities, for instance when such postmodern would-be Olympians appear in the media dressed in designer clothes, or brandishing their hair as if a certain shampoo brand has made it impervious to signs of age, in this way establishing a link between his or her image and the brand in question.

Fortunately, as the preceding discussion of Hardt and Negri's work<sup>14</sup> demonstrates, the means for the critical appropriation of the various aspects of postmodern culture are there – one only has to avail oneself of such means. Besides, it will be recalled that Butler, in his description of the postmodern condition (above), claims that '...most information is apparently to be distrusted, as being...a contribution to the manipulative image-making of those in power' – which suggests that a widespread cynicism pervades postmodernity. The crucial question is, however: how many people

---

<sup>13</sup> *Although it is impossible to do justice to it within the limits of the present article, Sherry Turkle (1997) has shown at length in her study of the social effects of the internet – one of the major means of communication today – that it has given rise to surprisingly novel forms of social identity. Her findings corroborate the argument advanced here, namely that in the context of postmodernity (and all its constituent features, such as globalisation and 'informatization') the notion of identity can no longer be understood in exactly the same way as before.*

<sup>14</sup> *In their second major work – Multitude (2005) – they take the argument of Empire further, this time focusing on the development, structure and global manifestations of the alternative to the power of Empire, namely that of the 'multitude' (the counterpart they offer for Marx and Engels's 'proletariat', although they mean something fundamentally different by it). It cannot be exhaustively pursued here. For such a thoroughgoing treatment of it see Olivier.*

– even if they adopt an intuitive attitude of cynicism towards the world – are capable of a truly critical appropriation of the social, political, economic and cultural practices that comprise their daily communicational space? When one considers the economic (consumerist) behaviour of the vast majority of people under conditions of globalisation, it is clear that only a very small percentage of them display a 'critical' attitude – nor is the fact that recent studies have shown two-year-old toddlers already to have developed brand loyalties in the US, exactly cause for optimism.

#### **4. THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY**

The corollary of the question concerning critical practice, together with the depressing tendencies regarding 'brand loyalties', has a bearing on the issue of identity in consumer society. Brand loyalties and other communicational uses of carefully selected images and image configurations have everything to do with the cynical shaping of consumer identities, as Steger and Butler – referred to earlier – remind one. It will also be remembered that I have pointed out the ambivalence of the postmodern valorisation of 'difference' in the face of this monodimensional manipulation of identity (which subverts authentic differences in favour of a more fundamental, capitalist-induced homogeneity). Hence, it would seem that there are countervailing tendencies at work in the present situation, as Steger's sober appraisal of the limits of homogenising globalisation – evident in the emergence of hybrid identities – also indicates. A brief consideration – given the vast area of research implicated – of what 'identity' means is called for here; that is, how an individual's identity is acquired, and what its structural characteristics are. Among the various possibilities concerning identity are that it could be considered unitary, dualistic or multidimensional, stable or dynamic. If the latter were the case, could one still legitimately speak of 'identity'? I shall here restrict myself to only the most essential considerations regarding this difficult question.

Undoubtedly, the theoretical matrix from which one has gained the most insight concerning the process, as well as the genealogical and formal conditions of identity-formation on the part of human subjects, is psychoanalytic theory. Media and communications theorists cannot ignore this if they wish to gain insight into the protean flux of media-engendered identities in globalised culture. And I hasten to add that in the term 'media' here not only include television, film, radio, and the printed media, but also the internet with its wealth of ever-proliferating text(-ing) and iconography, including e-mail exchanges. From Freud (1958: 100-161) one has learnt that individuals 'identify' with those images – whether of other individuals in social reality, or simulacra in the virtual space of the media – which, like the 'totem animals' revered by our hunter-gatherer forebears, seem to promise a certain measure of psychic protection and empowerment. So, for example, the marques of certain kinds of luxury cars inspire in consumers the desire to possess or own them, in exactly the same way as an ancient hunter or gatherer desired the protection of, for example, a sabretooth, signified by the image of such an animal painted on his or her arm or chest. Needless to say, and as Freud speculated, the line from primitive totemism to polytheistic practices, and later monotheistic worship of a faceless god, is arguably an unbroken one, which in the present era assumes the shape of consumers' desire for certain 'brands' above others. This is a constitutive element of identities.

In Jacques Lacan's work, a poststructuralist reinterpretation of Freud's work is encountered across a broad spectrum. His well-known account of the function of the mirror stage (1977: 1-7), as well as his earlier work on the so-called three imagoes (Lee, 1990: 13-17), as formative of a sense of self – that is, identity – is pertinent for present purposes. Very briefly: in his account of the unconscious formative role of the 'maternal imago', the 'fraternal imago' and the 'paternal imago', he draws attention to the fact that every infant, because it is needy and deficient regarding sustenance, warmth and shelter, and depends for these on its mother or another 'carer' of sorts, finds in the mother figure the correlate of its own deficiency: the source of everything it needs (Lee, 1990: 14). Hence, at an unconscious level, a 'maternal imago' is lodged which, from this moment on, functions in a quasi-transcendental fashion as the condition of the possibility for the recognition of, and desire for, something ineluctably modelled on this imago. It is 'quasi-' transcendental in so far as it *also* lays the foundation for the 'impossibility' of what is so recognised, and for the recognition itself, which is always subject to doubt – that is, invariably the desired (and supposed) 'fullness' or wholeness of the image modelled on the maternal imago is spurious or illusory, and at an unconscious level, the subject is aware of this. Lacan stresses that this ('maternal') imago – which, together with the image encountered in the 'mirror stage', is the most important of the three for present purposes – also comprises the structural counterpart of all ideological (including religious) psychical commitments on the part of the individual. The 'fraternal imago' is embedded in the infant subject's unconscious when she or he experiences her or his world as unavoidably populated by others (brothers, sisters, cousins, 'friends') with whom one has to compete for the affections of parents and other authority figures (Lee, 1990: 14). Hence – and here Lacan follows Freud – one could argue that evidence suggests that the earliest social experience to which one is privy, establishes the feelings of envy and of jealousy as model for all subsequent social experience. (If the objection is raised that 'love' for the mother figure is the earliest of such feelings, consider that such 'love' is inseparable from the desire for the wholeness that the mother represents, and is therefore hardly 'social' or related to others as others; it is a feeling inseparable from one's own sense of inadequacy and the consequent desire for compensation.) The 'paternal imago' is related to what Freud calls the Oedipus complex – the psychic mechanism for the child's entry into the world via submission to parental authority, and identification with the parent of the same sex. Here, Lacan (Lee, 1990: 15) argues that the unconscious formation of a 'paternal imago' in the infant's psyche is a precondition for the child's development of a sexual identity, but *also* (as quasi-transcendental) ineluctably the potential source of all kinds of complicating problems in this domain of experience, including the possibility of subversion of the established social order represented by this imago.

The 'mirror stage' theorised by Lacan (1977: 1-7) provides the clearest articulation of the indispensable process of identity-formation on the part of the subject<sup>15</sup>. Here he argues that the mirror-image

---

<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere I have considered the question of identity at greater length (see Olivier, 2004; 2005a; 2006 and 2006a). See especially 'Lacan and narrative identity: The Piano Teacher' (Olivier, 2005a), 'Popular art, the image, the subject and subverting hegemony' (Olivier, 2006) and 'Die kompleksiteit van identiteit in demokrasie' (Olivier, 2006a), for a more thoroughgoing treatment of the quasi-transcendental structural conditions for the emergence of a sense of 'self' or identity on the part of the subject, as well as of the complex structure of subjectivity according to Lacan. Because the Lacanian sources regarding the developmental constitution of identity are thoroughly addressed and appropriated in those papers, it is not necessary to do so here; in addition to Lacanian sources cited, it is sufficient to refer to them. In a recent paper psychoanalytical theorist, Andrea Hurst (2007), has elaborated further on the complexity of the subject's identity in Lacanian terms by relating it to the question of violence along the axes of a theory of the passions.

of 'itself', beheld by the infant in the mirror, functions in an ambivalent – that is, a quasi-transcendental – manner to impart to him or her both a sense of unity and wholeness that it still lacks at the level of motor-movement, *and*, importantly, a (largely unconscious) sense of alienation from its own image. The reason for this is not hard to find: what appears to be a recognition of itself in the mirror-image, is really, as Lacan labels it, a *misrecognition* – even at the purely optical level there is a mismatch between the mirror-image and the infant's appearance (what is on the left appears on the right, etc.), but more significantly, what the image represents, namely, ostensible unity, wholeness and coherence, is contradicted by the infant subject's experience of itself, so that the mirror-image, according to Lacan (1977: 4), plays an 'orthopaedic' role in the subject's life by constantly exhorting (and falsely assuring) her or him regarding their 'togetherness'. Moreover, this iconically-based process of identification sets in motion a never-ending dialectic of successive identifications on the part of the subject (with other individuals, whether real or virtual, like celebrities' media-images, or with iconic configurations of an ideological kind), metonymically grafted onto the primordial mirror-image.

It should be noted that the mirror-image as privileged site of identification solidifies what started at an earlier stage with the 'maternal imago', similarly proffering to the subject the spurious promise of a plenum or fullness which would compensate for its congenital lack and deficiency. As such – as previously noted – it comprises the ambivalent site for all ideological or religious identifications. It is also important to realise that, the ideological pitfalls of image-identification notwithstanding, no subject can bypass the stages in his/her life where 'identity' is forged in the crucible of iconic ambivalence. To this should be added that the mirror stage is linked to the 'fraternal imago' too, through the element of rivalry which ensues on the realisation that socially, one is always, unavoidably, in competition with others. Lacan (Olivier, 2005a: 98-101) reminds one that the mirror-image itself (one's 'own' image) elicits rivalry and aggression on the part of the subject towards it, given the comparative unity and wholeness that it displays. This reinforces the aggressiveness and rivalry that, for the rest of the subject's life, she or he will display towards others. The role of the media in promoting such rivalry and, concomitantly, consumer spending, in relation to the ubiquitous iconic representations of celebrities (with which consumers identify in 'wannabe'-fashion), should be obvious here.

## 5. ARCHIVING TECHNOLOGY AND IDENTITY

Given its pertinence to the present theme, it would be remiss not to refer briefly, here, to Derrida's (1996) startling analysis of the tensions in Freud's work regarding the human psyche conceived of as an *archive*, or 'archiving machine', given its far-reaching implications for the intermittent transformation of human subjectivity, including the possibility that one's very 'identity' may be configured and reconfigured in relation to technological devices. In a nutshell, according to Derrida's reading (1996: 13-20; Hurst, 2006: 151-161), Freud (perhaps inadvertently) was not simply – by considering various models of the psyche (such as the so-called 'mystic pad', with its wax tablet and wax paper, covered by a celluloid sheet, on which children could write and clear the surface by lifting the sheet) – engaged in judging the apparatus's efficacy in *representing* the psyche, but was in effect alluding to the different ways in which a variety of prosthetic technological devices

affect the very structure of the psyche (Derrida, 1996: 15). In particular, Derrida suggests speculatively that certain 'geo-techno-logical shocks' might have had a revolutionary effect on the 'psychoanalytic archive' if, instead of the handwritten letters exchanged among Freud and his contemporaries, the latter had had access to these, including (the invention of) tape recorders, faxes, printers, televisions, '...and above all E-mail' (p. 16). It is difficult to overestimate the radical nature of Derrida's little 'retrospective science fiction', as he calls it. It bears on nothing less than the structure of the human psyche, and therefore on that of human identity. In his words (Derrida, 1996: 16-17):

It would have transformed this history [of psychoanalysis] from top to bottom and in the most initial inside of its production, in its very *events*. This is another way of saying that the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media.

What does it mean to claim that the 'state of the art' of communication technology determines the field of psychoanalysis? It seems to me that Derrida (1996: 18) answers this question succinctly where he says: '...what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives'. In other words, in a certain sense the technological devices that humans invent, dialectically shape the manner in which they comprehend and act in the world – it shapes the structural dynamics of culture and society, as well as the structure of human identity. How many investigations of this sort have there been to determine the dialectical changes wrought by e-mail in human behaviour, by sms-ing or 'texting' via mobile phones, not merely in the language of interpersonal communication, but in the very way that individuals think and speak, that is, in the linguistic constitution of their identities? In sum: communications technology does not leave human identity unaffected; on the contrary. And (something to ruminate on!) analogously, the news media – television, radio, internet news – produces, as much as records, the very structure of the news, with undeniable political consequences.

It seems as if one simply cannot escape from the effects of the media and communications (and archiving) technology – wherever you go, they seem to infiltrate your personality. If this seems far-fetched, consider how teenagers' behaviour has been affected by the use of cellphones: it is nothing unusual to see them 'acting' for the benefit of being cellphone photographed by their friends, and similarly 'recording' (that is, simultaneously structuring) the behaviour of others whenever it seems warranted, something that is, in its turn, determined by what the media has established ('structured') as being worthy of 'recording' by means of a video camera or a cellphone. And, as argued, such 'recording', determined by certain changing technical possibilities of capturing, archiving and reproducing texts and images, provides the structural conditions for the kind of identities contemporary subjects tend to have, especially as far as glamorised images are concerned.



## 6. IDENTIFICATION, LANGUAGE, DIFFÉRANCE AND THE REAL

Fortunately, this is not all there is to identification. The function of images at the level of what Lacan calls the 'imaginary register' is amplified and qualitatively transformed by the infant subject's acquisition of language (at the level of the Lacanian 'symbolic register'). Instead of simply providing assurances of particularistic iconic wholeness (which, because the imaginary imbricates the symbolic, does function in language through metaphor and metonymy), language, through the universalistic implications of concepts, allows the subject for the first time to become what humans are in a certain sense destined to be, namely 'subjects' in the true sense. Only someone capable of language in the broad sense of conceptual signification and communication can transcend what would otherwise be the prison of iconicity – the word as signifier always has a signified attached to it in the guise of a conceptual meaning: the word 'tiger' thus signifies something like 'large, mammalian, striped, carnivorous quadruped'. An individual's name – Petro Anderson, for example – inserts her or him into the conceptual kinship and other social relations constitutive of the social bond. (Before an individual has a name, it is difficult, if not impossible, to relate him or her to social and cultural laws, customs or practices.) Through language the subject not only enters the world of conceptual meaning, but – significantly – 'subjects herself' to the values and normativeness inherent in language. This is what it means to be a subject, and the link between the entry into language and Lacan's 'paternal imago' should be obvious. In a still largely patriarchal society, what Lacan calls the 'name of the Father' operates as a 'transcendental signifier' to anchor other signifiers normatively in the symbolic system. Needless to say, the centrality of this patriarchal signifier (which hides a more fundamental, but repressed signifier, namely what Lacan calls the *phallus*)<sup>16</sup> can, has been, and still is being, challenged by many (including Lacan himself, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Joan Copjec, Andrea Hurst and others).

The most significant acquisition through language, on the part of the subject, is the ability to distance her- or himself critically from all those (mainly capitalist-values oriented) iconic identifications that continually threaten to imprison them with their false allure. Without the conceptual dimension inherent in language, such critical capacity is unthinkable. What one gains through language is therefore the symbolic means towards continually refashioning one's own identity<sup>17</sup> – not in a clinically schizophrenic way, but nevertheless by imparting to oneself the ability to re-narrate one's own life-story, as it were, at crucial junctures in one's life, through the critical re-appropriation of one's own iconic and linguistic identity (Olivier, 2004: 12-13). In this sense, language frees one from iconic incarceration – a capacity much needed in this age of media saturation of personal space with constantly changing, but metonymically homogeneous, hyper-desirable images. But any perceptive reader would know that language comprises, in Nietzsche's idiom, a 'prison-house'

---

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere (Olivier, 2005b) I have explored the function of this signifier, as well as its possible revision in non-gendered terms, in the context of the question concerning the ethical orientation of psychotherapists.

<sup>17</sup> From a structuralist perspective it may be argued that, given one's insertedness in the system of language, the individual is 'spoken by language' (that is, determined by it) but in poststructuralist terms one could raise the objection that this would make it very difficult to explain how individuals are able to adopt the value system of another culture than the one in which one was raised in the first place. Hence, for poststructuralists, the subject is both 'spoken by' language, and simultaneously able to (re-)position her- or himself in language or with regard to the desire-invested galaxy of media icons (Olivier, 2006). This is the meaning of ethical freedom.



of its own, and the persistent misunderstanding by many, even most, scholars, of Derrida's (1980: 158) remark, that 'there is no outside-text' (commonly mistranslated from the French as 'there is nothing outside of the text'), unfairly attributes such symbolic solipsism to the latter as well (see for example Butler, 2002: 21). The fact is that both Lacan and Derrida (as well as other poststructuralists like Deleuze and Kristeva), give one the means to resist such solipsism – Lacan through his third register, that of the so-called 'real', and Derrida through his notion of *différance*, both of which emphasise that language is continually being breached by its 'internal limit' (Lacan's 'real') or the countervailing forces of 'spacing' and 'temporization' (Derrida's *différance*)<sup>18</sup>. What do these baffling notions mean, and how do they rescue one from language's (as well as images') potential for semiotic totalisation or saturation of meaning (which is no meaning at all)?

Derrida's notion of *différance* is a 'quasi-transcendental', which simply means that it is the condition of all meaning, as well as, simultaneously, of the decay or, as Andrea Hurst (2004: 251-252) puts it, the 'ruin' of meaning. In other words, the very way that meaning operates – where signifiers (e.g. 'cat') refer to signifieds (a furry, carnivorous mammal that emits the sound 'miaow'), which again, this time as as signifiers ('carnivorous', 'quadruped') refer to other signifieds ('meat-eating', 'four-legged'), and so on, endlessly – also unavoidably creates the possibility of misunderstanding. Because signification is arbitrary, that is, a convention, 'cat' could be understood at one level, the denotative (as referring to the animal), but misunderstood at another, the connotative (as apparently suggesting that someone is a 'catty' person). As soon as there is communication through signs (linguistic or iconic) – in fact, as soon as there are signs of any kind – there is the possibility of understanding, meaning, as well as of misunderstanding or the failure of the attempt to communicate meaningfully or intelligibly. In so far as meaning tends towards relative stability, or an 'economy' of meaning, it is subject to the 'temporization' afforded by *différance*, and where it inclines towards a dissemination, proliferation or fragmentation of meaning, it is subject to the 'spacing' of *différance* (Derrida, 1982: 7-9; Hurst, 2004: 250; Olivier, 2005c: 83). In short, *différance*, as the inescapably ambivalent condition of meaning and its concomitant deterioration, is that which, instead of being lamentable, ensures that humans will never be totally imprisoned in language or images, because its very structural dynamic – spacing and temporisation – *simultaneously* engenders novelty or invention, as well as stability or conventional meaning. *Différance* is the invisible 'seam' in signification and communication where things are held together even as they fall apart.

The same is true of Lacan's register of the 'real' – Joan Copjec (2002: 95-96) characterises it aptly by calling it 'the internal limit of the symbolic' (language). When one finds oneself incapable of articulating a certain experience – whether traumatic, like a shattering car accident, or an event like 9/11<sup>19</sup>, or, by contrast, wonderfully, ineffably uplifting, such as a uniquely 'earth-moving' sexual encounter, or a wilderness experience which surpasses a city-dweller's ability to describe its transformation or expansion of one's sensibility – when words fail to capture it, and it has to be gradually, painstakingly stitched together with one's familiar social 'reality', or symbolic universe (something necessary, but falsifying regarding the event), one has encountered the 'real' (see

---

<sup>18</sup> See in this regard Andrea Hurst's (2006) ground-breaking and illuminating study of the logical isomorphism between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derrida's poststructuralist thinking, which demonstrates convincingly that, despite their difference in idiom, they share what she terms 'the plural logic of the aporia'.

<sup>19</sup> See in this regard my interpretation (Olivier, 2006b) of Derrida and Habermas's respective responses to 9/11 in the book edited by Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a time of terror*.

Olivier, 2005b: 671-680; Olivier, 2006b). This is the guarantee that the human universe of signification and of communication is, and will remain, an 'open' universe, instead of a closed domain, as Baudrillard's (1996) notion of 'hyperreality' – the idea that we are enclosed in an endlessly self-referential world of 'simulacra', or images without referents – seems to indicate. Which brings us back to identification.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Nothing suits the endlessly transmogrifying process (always colonising new spaces for the sake of profit; Marx's 'all that is solid melts into air') of capital better than the media-reinforced impression of an iconic 'hyperreality'. After all, as long as consumers are kept ignorant of being 'imprisoned' in this 'normalized' world of desire-invested images, they are likely to spend their cash on the commodities signified by the image-configurations which bombard them incessantly, and with which they identify, willy-nilly. Teeny-boppers 'wannabe' like Britney, like J-Lo, like Christina Aguilera, 'cool dudes' like Brad, Jude, Colin Farrell, and a host of other 'celebs' – the seductive but inaccessible deities of the 21st century Olympus, better known as Hollywood. One might say to them: 'Get a life', but they would probably think you mean 'Get into movies, modelling, TV, the media'. What should be clear in the light of my preceding discussion of the processes underpinning identification, is that every human individual is in principle *able* to resist, or break out of the ostensibly suffocating leech-field of capitalism-engendered sites of identification, which really means *prostitution* of one's own subjectivity.

Don't get me wrong – no one living in the present socio-economic reality can avoid living ambivalently (that is, resisting and modifying that which is unacceptable to you as far as possible, while making use of it for living), even when one is as much an enemy of the dehumanising power of capital as I am, and many others are. We all buy food from supermarkets, have bank accounts, houses, cars, and so on, which means we are all ineluctably complicit with the culture of capitalism. But – and this is a crucial 'but' – one need not be 'spoken' by the discourse of capitalism, one can effectively negotiate its terrain and retain one's own freedom – of choice, of identity, of critical appropriation of those conventions necessary for social life – and in the process also 'speak oneself'. Open yourself to experiences not mediated by capital, such as spending a week in the wilderness with a minimum of reliance on the commodities and the economy of multinational capitalism. Discover the economy and the aneconomy of forests, mountain streams and caves, possibly even of wild animals. Buy an oldish car and maintain it well, rather than fall for the promotion of yet another 'best model ever', which won't be the 'best' any longer in another six months: buying it puts you on a treadmill of exchange value. Start a love-affair with a person – a human being – instead of with your cellphone. Or your yuppie car. Tell your bank manager that bank charges are too high, and that, unless he or she gives you a better deal, you may move your account elsewhere. Refuse to be exploited by the 'captains of industry' – speak up when you notice (as you should) that the communications and promotions, through advertising and branding, concerning certain products and services, such as private medical services, are misleading or demeaning and exploitative. Private hospitals position themselves as businesses, in the process conveniently ignoring that

health services, because they involve medical doctors, also implicate the Hippocratic oath (which has today become the 'hypocritical oath'), according to which no one ought to be refused medical treatment by a doctor when she or he needs it – least of all because of lack of money. Know your and your culture's history, so that you can offer intelligent opposition to attempts, on the part of ignorant managers of universities (who should know better), to change these institutions of critical higher learning into mere agents for the neo-liberal transformation of universities into businesses for profit. Instead of being a regular couch potato, hypnotised by hyper-capitalised sports matches on television, get out there and do something recreational yourself, such as cycling, hiking, swimming, or walking in a park with a friend or with your dog. Play with your cat Max or Pookah – he or she may teach you something about communicating with other animals, especially in the ludic mode. Experience the liberating joy of discovering that money can be a means, but should never be an end. Learn anew that being is preferable to having or owning.

In these, as well as a host of other ways, one can develop one's own identity – one that is never static, but also never merely a plaything of the cynical forces of capital or any other ideology; that is, a dynamic, critical identity. Resist the *Matrix* – not the movies, but the true Matrix of capitalism, which keeps most consumers anaesthetised, passively 'consuming' in their sardine tins, their eyes fixed on the telly of consumer reality and believing that it is all there is. Follow the example of the alienated detective in Proyas's neo-noir, *Dark City*, by refusing the spectre of the manipulation of identities by alienating forces – the metaphorical embodiment of consumer capitalism with its tendency to eradicate a sense of personal history or memory, which is a prerequisite for a sense of identity. Get a life – appropriate your own identity in the face of the complex networks of interwoven, interconnected sites offered by the prevailing communications systems of postmodernity, which may seem to incarcerate you, but cannot do so, provided you know how to play the game by different rules. Negotiate your own identity inventively in the welter of consumer conventions; do so over and over, innovatively, but guard against losing the ability to communicate.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, W. (Ed.) (1996). *The Fontana postmodernism reader*. London: Fontana Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (1996). The map precedes the territory. In: Anderson, W.T. (Ed.) *The Fontana postmodernism reader*. London: Fontana Press, pp.75-77.
- Butler, C. (2002). *Postmodernism*. A very short introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Copjec, J. (2002). *Imagine there's no woman*. Ethics and sublimation. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Derrida, J. (1980). *Of grammatology*. Transcendental. (G.C. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . (1982). *Différance*. In: *Margins of philosophy*. (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-27.
- . (1996). *Archive fever. A Freudian impression*. (E. Prenowitz, Trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Foster, H. (Ed.) (1985). *The anti-aesthetic. Essays on postmodern culture*. Port Townsend: Bay Press.

- Freud, S. (1958). *Totem and taboo*. In: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIII (1913-1914). (J. Strachey, Trans.). London: The Hogarth Press, pp. 1-161.
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- . (2005). *Multitude. War and democracy in the age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hurst, A. (2004). Derrida's quasi-transcendental thinking. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 23 (3), pp. 244-266.
- . (2006). *Derrida or Lacan: The revolutionary's choice. On the 'plural logic of the aporia' in deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis*. Doctoral Thesis in Philosophy, Villanova University, USA: ProQuest.
- Kovel, J. (2002). *The enemy of nature. The end of capitalism or the end of the world?* London & New York: Zed Books.
- Lacan, J. (1977). The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience. In: *Écrits: A selection*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 1-7.
- Lee, J.S. (1990). *Jacques Lacan*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Lyon, D. (1994). *Postmodernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1984). Answering the question: What is postmodernism? In *The postmodern condition. A report on knowledge*. (R. Durand, Trans.). Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 71-82.
- . (1984a). *The postmodern condition. A report on knowledge*. (G. Bennington, & B. Massumi, Trans.). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- . (1991). Rewriting modernity. In *The inhuman. Reflections on time*. (G. Bennington, & B. Massumi, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press, pp.24-35.
- . (1995). *Towards the postmodern*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press.
- Megill, A. (1985). *Prophets of extremity. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Norris, C. (1990). *What's wrong with postmodernism. Critical theory and the ends of philosophy*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Norris, C. (1993). *The truth about postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Olivier, B. (2002). Modernity, Modernism and Postmodernist Film: surfaces in Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*. In *Projections: Philosophical themes on film*. University of Port Elizabeth Publications, pp. 111-126.
- . (2004). Lacan's subject: the imaginary, language, the real and philosophy. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 23 (1), pp. 1-19.
- . (2004a). Urban Space in 21st-Century South Africa. *Leading architecture and Design*, May/June, pp.63-66.
- . (2004b). The (im-)possibility of communication. *Communicare*, Vol. 23, (1), pp.79-91.
- . (2005). Nature, capitalism, and the future of humankind. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 24 (2), pp.121-135.
- . (2005a). Lacan and narrative identity: *The Piano Teacher*. In: *Word, (wo)man, world: Essays on literature. Festschrift for Ina Gräbe*. Oliphant, A.W. & Roos, H. (Eds). Pretoria: UNISA Press, pp.94-112.

- (2005b). Lacan and the question of the psychotherapist's ethical orientation. *SA Journal of Psychology*, 35 (4), pp. 657-683.
  - (2005c). The contemporary context of relativity and relativism. *Acta Academica Supplementum*, (2) (Special edition on *Relativity and relativism*), pp. 73-104.
  - (2006). Popular art, the image, the subject and subverting hegemony. *Communicatio*, Vol. 32 (1), 2006, pp. 16-37.
  - (2006a). Die kompleksiteit van identiteit in demokrasie: Lacan. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe (Journal for the Humanities)*, Vol. 46 (4), pp. 482-497.
  - (2006b). The question of an appropriate philosophical response to 'global' terrorism: Derrida and Habermas. *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*, 54 (1/2), pp. 146-167.
  - (2007). 'Communication' in the era of 'Empire' and 'multitude'. *Communicatio*, Vol. 33 (1). In press.
- Steger, M.B. (2003). *Globalization. A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Suarez-Orozco, M.M. & Baolian Qin-Hilliard, D. (Eds). (2004). *Globalization. Culture and education in the New Millennium*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Turkle, S. (1997). *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the internet*. London: Phoenix.
- Žižek, S. (2000). *The fragile absolute, or, why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* New York: Verso.