

# **JOURNEYS IN DESIGN**

**EXPLORING ISSUES IN DESIGNING ACROSS CULTURES**

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## 0. INTRODUCTION

“Cultural diversity is the common heritage of humankind. The Information Society should be founded on and stimulate respect for cultural identity, cultural and linguistic diversity, traditions and religions, and foster dialogue among cultures and civilizations.”

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES, *World Summit on the Information Society*.

### A. TITLE

“Journeys In Design” explores issues around intercultural design and diversity in visual communication, in the form of a personal research process as well as an interactive piece featuring designers from twelve different countries.

### B. CONCEPT AND OBJECTIVES

Due to a variety of social changes we are currently experiencing, including globalization, the establishment of the internet as an unprecedented global network as well as the shift from industrial to information society, designers are nowadays increasingly involved in projects targeted at a global audience. Especially New Media–designers, working within the global realm of the World Wide Web, are increasingly faced with challenges on how to communicate effectively across cultures in an informed and sensitive way.

Accordingly, this research is concerned with the question: *Which issues should designers consider in communicating visually across cultures?*

### C. KEYWORDS

Intercultural design, cultural diversity, pluralism, global/local, dissolution of boundaries, power, cross-cultural representation, inclusiveness.

## D. SCOPE AND CONTEXT

This project constitutes my thesis for the Master of New Media at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. Journeys In Design is developed as a three-stage process, at this point moving into its third stage.

### STAGE ONE: THE “JOURNEYS IN DESIGN”–WEBSITE

The website “Journeys In Design” – [www.mlab.uiah.fi/journeysindesign](http://www.mlab.uiah.fi/journeysindesign) – is a research production on intercultural design and diversity in visual communication, featuring contributions of designers from twelve different countries. The production took place between 11 March and 20 June 2003 at the Department of Multimedia Design at the National School of Design / Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, where I was participating in an international exchange program for one year.

As an *interactive dialogue* exploring the views of designers from twelve different countries Journeys In Design served me as initial research on the issue of intercultural design, hearing a variety of perspectives and consequently helping me to make sense of these issues for myself.

### STAGE TWO: THE RESEARCH PAPER

As the second phase of my thesis which took place from 6 September 2003 to 12 March 2004 at the Media Lab of the University of Art and Design Helsinki, Finland, I conducted more in-depth research on issues related to intercultural design. This stage served me as *personal learning process*, trying to make sense of these issues for myself as a designer.

Within my research I aimed to build bridges to related disciplines, including social sciences, cultural theory, media studies and graphic design – as I considered a *multidisciplinary approach* invaluable in order to expand my horizons as designer of interactive media as well as to take into account the complexity of the topic of intercultural design.

### STAGE THREE: EXTENDING THE “JOURNEYS IN DESIGN”–WEBSITE

This third stage of Journeys In Design concerns a future extension of the project, which I am planning to develop during April 2004. This last phase serves two

objectives: Increasing the number of featured designers, especially from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East in order to be able to show a greater variety of perspectives. Secondly, to include insights gained from the research of stage two by adding a second dimension to the interface. This “layer” could interact as a direct dialogue with the audience, confronting them with their own cultural bias, presenting provocative statements or questions and depict images of successful or insensitive intercultural designs. This stage would use the interactive qualities of the medium in order to incite self-reflection among the audience.

## E. AUDIENCE

Journeys In Design is generally targeted at the international *design community*, especially in the field of visual communication and interactive media, working within the global realm of the World Wide Web. Furthermore, the project focuses towards designers who are practising within the context of so-called “Western” culture – which appears to have a heavy influence in contemporary design on a global level. Accordingly, the project aims to appeal to self-reflexive and ethic-oriented behaviour of designers in this context, promoting the value of cultural diversity.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that the target audience of Journeys In Design is *overlapping but not identical* for its forms of the website and the research paper. The website might appeal more to a younger, web-savy audience which prefers playful interaction and fast consumption through visuals, while the research paper requires a slower, contemplative stance which not all new media professionals have the resources or interest for. In this sense, I assume that the website will be more far-reaching than the research paper, as the majority of the audience who will read the paper will also visit the website – while this won’t be the case conversely.

Another major characteristic of the audience of Journeys In Design is that they are required to master the *English language*. This is certainly regrettable, as it restricts inclusiveness of the potential audience, and even more in a project on intercultural communication. Nevertheless, as a result of my available resources for this project, I needed to accept this requirement at the current stage.

The audience of the “Journeys In Design”-website furthermore needs to fulfil certain *technical requirements* including Internet-access, preferably with sound-output devices, as well as having the Macromedia Flash 6-Plugin installed. Using the Flash-technology for the website might also be a possible issue restricting access – nevertheless I decided to do so in the awareness that I can assume certain technical equipment and computer-literacy from an audience of designers who professionally work with these media, and because use of this technology greatly expanded my means for creative expression and interactivity.

## F. AIMS AND GOALS

Journeys In Design aims to *start a dialogue* and raise questions on issues around intercultural design and cultural diversity in contemporary visual design. As a personal learning process the foremost objective of this project is to enable me to establish and provide a *framework* which helps me to make sense of these issues for myself as a designer, and which others perhaps find useful as a starting point to build their own.

Moreover, Journeys In Design aims to *raise awareness* among designers on intercultural communication and its consequences, appealing to create a stance of self-reflective and ethic-oriented behaviour. By raising related questions within the design community this project hopes to create an increased sense of socio-cultural responsibility among designers and aims to promote diversity and cultural sensitivity.

## G. DELIVERABLES

The project is delivered in two parts, including

+ *Journeys In Design*: An interactive piece featuring the perspective of twelve designers with culturally diverse backgrounds on issues around intercultural design and cultural diversity in visual communication, which is available on the World Wide Web. [www.mlab.uiah.fi/journeysindesign](http://www.mlab.uiah.fi/journeysindesign)



+ *Journeys In Design – Exploring Issues in Designing Across Cultures*: A research paper on issues for designers to consider when engaging in intercultural design.

## H. PRODUCTION OF THE “JOURNEYS IN DESIGN”-WEBSITE

As the starting point of the project the production of the website “Journeys In Design” allowed me to better understand the issues I was interested to explore in my research as well as hear the perspectives of designers from culturally diverse backgrounds. Accordingly it provided me as a tool for thinking with valuable insights which I will now outline in this context, together with the process I went through.

### THE PROCESS

After conducting initial research in March 2003 I developed a questionnaire in order to interview designers from various countries. It contained the following questions:

#### *PART ONE: QUESTIONNAIRE*

- 00. Your name:*
- 01. Which year were you born and where?*
- 02. Where do you currently live?*
- 03. Have you ever lived in other countries? If yes for how long?*
- 04. Which languages do you speak?*
- 05. Which country would you love to travel to?*
- 06. Which field(s) do you study or work in?*
  
- 07. What does Cultural Diversity mean to you?*
- 08. Is there enough Cultural Diversity in Design? What about Movies or the Media?  
(Please explain briefly.)*
- 09. Recent developments including new technology and information systems have made international contact more frequent and pervasive than ever before. How will this be of consequence in design?*
- 10. Do you think that Globalization affects culture/people’s lives? How?*
- 11. What is the role of design and media in the Globalization process?*

12. *Have you ever been involved in a project that was targeted at a multicultural audience?*

*IF YES:*

13.1. *Were there any special considerations on intercultural communication in the process?*

13.2. *What was your overall experience?*

13.3. *Did you experience any challenges?*

*IF NO:*

14.1. *Would it affect your design process if you would design for a multicultural audience? How?*

15. *What do you see as most important in designing across cultures?*

These questions were designed to gather various forms of information about each featured designer:

00–06 ought to supply personal and professional information as well as give insights on her/his cultural experience and knowledge of other cultures. These questions were also supposed to create a better picture of each individual.

07–11 were designed to explore notions of cultural diversity and how it relates to design and media as well as if he/she perceives design to be affected by socio-cultural influences and specifically globalization.

12–15 aim to gather information on their potential personal experiences in intercultural design as well as their attitudes towards the intercultural design process.

Additionally, as a second part, another paper contained the following information:

#### *PART TWO: INTERPRETATION*

*di-ver-si-ty – n. pl. di-ver-si-ties*

1. *a. The fact or quality of being diverse; difference.  
b. A point or respect in which things differ.*
2. *Variety or multiformity*

*Synonyms: variety, diverseness, multeity, multifariousness, multiformity, multiplicity, variousness*

*Create a piece about DIVERSITY.*

*What comes to your mind when you hear “diversity”? Explore what diversity means to you, which role it plays in our lives, celebrate the world’s diversity... Your work can be 2D or 3D, Sound, Video or Interactive. It can be a quick sketch or a deeper exploration.*

Giving this task I was interested how people would express themselves through their work – as well as to understand their personal notion of diversity, which can be better clarified through audio-visual media than text as it can be so many things.

Subsequently, I sent these two papers per email to a number of designers from my personal network, many of which are my friends whom I have met during my studies in Finland and Australia, and invited them to participate in the project by submitting their responses to the questionnaire, a photo and their visual interpretation to me until 12 May 2003. Twelve of them were able to contribute in the end, representing a variety of fields within design as well as art such as Interactive and Graphic Design, Interior Architecture, Textile Design, Sculpture and Painting. Their countries of origin included Australia, Brazil, China, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Sweden, Thailand and the USA.

While it would have been desirable to feature designers from a greater variety of countries, especially from Latin America, Africa and Arab nations – this was not a possibility at this point. Anyhow, the website does of course not attempt to feature any kind of representative selection – but it aims to create an interactive dialogue between the audience and these twelve individuals which might inspire to consider different perspectives. Furthermore, I was pleased to feature these diverse contributions in order to subtly draw attention to the fact that there are flourishing design communities in various parts of the world – which are nevertheless not always visible within “international” design publications. My suspicion that some designers might therefore think that there are no design scenes outside of North America, Europe or Japan

turned out to have a point when somebody interacting with the website commented: “Indonesia? I didn’t know there are designers in Indonesia.”

## INTERFACE DESIGN

Working with the contributions I received I decided to emphasize the questions which were answered in a – from my point of view – particularly insightful way as well as especially noteworthy parts of the answer *typographically* and with *colour*. This design solution also responded to the fact that we do not particularly like reading from the screen and I therefore considered it necessary to provide highlights and focus the audience’s attention as I regard the questions and answers important and worthwhile to be actually read and reflected upon.

Furthermore, the solution for navigation was structured according to location with a world-map providing the main interface – which I also saw related to the idea of journeys and travelling.

Collaborating with Melbourne-based sound-artist *Xian* alias Christian Bishop also enabled me to add a *soundscape* to these journeys, as my own time resources were very limited. He sourced and edited music from various parts of the world which I then included at the cross-locations in the main interface. This soundscape was very enriching for the project, as it allowed to include cultural artefacts from more diverse countries than merely with the interviews, as well as it features music from different cultural groups than the mainstream culture of each country, such as indigenous music of Australian Aborigines and Native Americans. Additionally, I appreciate the soundscape for two reasons: it shows that culture has so many different dimensions, and it draws attention to the fact that many countries which are hardly visible within the international design community, such as Egypt or Jamaica, have great cultural richness to offer.

## EXPERIENCE GAINED

During the production process several challenges had to be overcome, including how to translate complex ideas and research into an appropriate visual language.

Furthermore, a major challenge originated from the too extensive scale of the project which I originally assumed, planning to feature the interpretations as well as create an informational website on intercultural design. After reconsidering the focus I finally down-sized the project to a more manageable scale within one semester, which helped the progress of the website immensely.

Other experience gained involved the long-distance collaboration with designers all over the world – which was a very positive experience, with the project being received enthusiastically and deadlines being met.

In terms of my further research in Stage Two, the project provided me with valuable insights from diverse perspectives on the topics I aimed to explore. First of all, I had been generally interested to explore if the issues raised through the questions were at all relevant to other designers or if I was overestimating the significance of this topic. In this sense the answers reassured me that these issues are indeed relevant to designers and that they in many cases have well-developed opinions on them. Concerning the answers themselves, while as far as I am concerned cultural patterns seemed to be visible, I did not intend to analyse them, deducting certain results, as I see the site more as a forum of individuals – with culturally diverse backgrounds indeed – but anyhow talking from their individual position and personal experience. Accordingly, the answers contributed to a preliminary qualitative research for me – but I do not assume that they can be generalized though.

## RECEPTION AND FEEDBACK

Having finalized the development process, Journeys In Design was subsequently presented as my individual study project at the National School of Design in June 2003. Furthermore, I invited friends and colleagues from my personal network by email to visit the site. The feedback I received from them was generally very positive, they believed the subject to be interesting and liked the aesthetic and interaction solutions.

Selected user-testing among the target audience also showed that the usability was high with people interacting ‘intuitively’ with the interface according to colour and simplified symbols such as arrows. Sometimes the interaction with the main

navigation, which needs to be dragged, turned out confusing to start with, anyhow once the users figured it out interaction was smooth.

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Looking at the website from a current point of view, after intense research on intercultural design, I have some critical points to add from a perspective of cultural usability.

First of all, it is certainly problematic that languages are restricted to English, On the one hand it limits the potential audience within the worldwide design community, and on the other – even more problematically – it interferes with clear communication with the featured individuals. As I am aware, some of the designers who contributed often find it difficult to express complex ideas of their mother tongue in the English language, such as my Chinese and Malay friend. While it is possible in personal communication to clarify some concepts, the way the answers are presented in the website cannot allow for further inquiry and can therefore lead to misunderstandings. Furthermore, I encountered problems because of this language barrier with the Brazilian designer who agreed to participate in the project. As my Portuguese is not very fluent and neither his English, while personal communication can be improvised, the questionnaire posed a problem. Consequently, I first need to arrange for somebody to help me with translation, as it will be enriching to include him as a highly talented visual artist.

Secondly, I am critical if the interface itself can work as intercultural design, about which I am quite sceptical. The minimalistic aesthetic is unlikely to cater for culturally diverse tastes and is closer to Swiss and Scandinavian visual language. Anyhow, developing an interface that would equally work for the featured designers' cultural orientations, from Korea to Sweden, would be indeed quite a challenge, if possible at all. In any case, even though this issue is problematic, I assume that the visual language does communicate to the audience the project is targeted at (please refer to section "Audience").

Thirdly, the project could gain much by presenting as well the perspective of African, Arabian and Latin American designers – which are missing at the current stage. Therefore, I aim to extend the website as a next phase.

## EXPOSURE

Up to this point I had the pleasure to exhibit Journeys In Design within two contexts:

- + Participating in the project MMM – *Moving Media Multiplier* – Journeys In Design was screened in the Kunsthalle Vienna on October 29, 2003.<sup>1</sup>
- + As part of the first exhibition on interactive/digital media *Loading Morelia*, in Morelia, Mexico in November 2003.<sup>2</sup>

## I. SITUATING MYSELF

As I will propose throughout this thesis that when engaging in intercultural communication we need to situate ourselves reflectively in order to understand the position we are talking from. For this reason I find it relevant to situate my own perspective as designer and author of this work to begin with.

Firstly I will give some details of my personal background and experiences that might give insights how my position has been shaped. Being brought up in Vienna, Austria in a multicultural family with my mother being Romanian–Greek and my father Austrian–German, I have been early exposed to a variety of cultures – additionally through my parents' international friends and my mother's profession of translator, being fluent in numerous languages. Throughout my professional education I have been eager to experience different cultures in order to expand my horizons and therefore participated in international exchange and study abroad programs in Helsinki, Finland, and Melbourne, Australia. These travels allowed me to experience the world of design as it is practised within different cultural contexts – as well in the academic as in the professional practise – and to complete design projects in international collaboration. But most of all they gave me the privilege to make friends from all over the world who continue to inspire me today.

This personal background has clearly fostered my interest in intercultural communication and design and my motivation for promoting cultural diversity. Anyhow, within the context of this work I need to identify the position I am talking from as author. Being brought up in Western Europe (also with knowledge of South–Eastern European traditions) and having lived in countries I would term “Western” (from a cultural and political, obviously not a geographical perspective) namely Austria, Finland and Australia, my position in intercultural encounters and communication is clearly shaped by this world-view. As I do not have direct knowledge of other cultural experiences my analyses in this work might run the risk of being naïve or superficial – especially when talking about cultural imperialism and racism, which I myself will obviously never be able to fully understand.<sup>3</sup>

This work is aware that it is a “self-representation of the dominant particular” with all its inherent problematic. (King in Featherstone, 1996) Nevertheless, within the context of this thesis and resulting from the privilege of my education, I am equipped with power resources not only *to be able to speak but also to be listened to* – something not to be taken for granted. Therefore, I am committed to use this power in order to raise a subject which I consider significant and which from my perspective deserves more attention within the design community.

If this project manages to make just one person look at different perspectives, raise awareness or even start a dialogue, I consider it to have achieved success.

#### NOTES TO INTRODUCTION:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mmm.ok.ag> (March 2, 2004). See also <http://www.kunsthallewien.at/en>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.loadingmorelia.web1000.com> (January 10, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to the forms and methods of racism I am discussing in this work.



*Dear Reader,*

*Within the following pages, I would like to invite you to join me on this exploration of Culture in Design during which we will navigate through seas of Social Changes, which form the socio-cultural environment of design as it is today, then cross the plains of Intercultural Communication where we will contemplate on diverse cultural encounters before we climb the mountains of intercultural design which, as we hope, will open us to new perspectives and extend our horizons. From there we will follow our way down on the rivers which will lead us to new realms in design, reflecting the cultural diversity of this world on their shining surface.*

*If you enjoy the sights and experiences of this journey, I invite you to continue on your own routes and bring your companions along to join these travels.*

*Time to take your compass and make the first steps.*

# I. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Embarking on this journey we will first need to cross the agitated seas of socio-cultural developments in order to understand the waters which nourish our field of design. Within the first chapters let us therefore explore the profound social, cultural and technological changes which have had a major impact on many societies at the dawn of the information age. Design as an integral part of cultural production is in the same way affected by these developments, which have even created new disciplines within design, such as the field of New Media–design. Therefore within the next chapters we will strive to establish a stance of reflective awareness and sensitivity of design’s profound and complex interrelations with its socio-cultural environment.

## A. SOCIAL CHANGES: INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE INFORMATION AGE

“While ethnic pluralism and cultural mixture has historically been the norm for most parts of the world, several aspects of contemporary globalization combine to make current conditions rather different. The relative ease and cheapness of transportation across long distances, mass tourism, large-scale migration, visible multiculturalism in ‘world cities’, the flow of commodities to and from all points of the compass and the rapid development of telecommunications (including cheap telephone calls, satellite television, email and the Internet) have all wrought a *socially and culturally interpenetrated planet, on a scale and intensity hitherto unseen.*”

(Vetovec and Cohen, 2001. Emphasis mine.)

During the 20th century and in particular the last decades of it the development of new technologies has profoundly changed the way people in many parts of the world live and connect to each other. Considering a *time-line* which points out recent technological inventions that had a major cultural impact, we can see how these new technologies have massively compressed two of the essential

variables which determine our lives: *time* and *space*. One phenomenon which has massively accelerated as a consequence of these developments is the *abundance and frequency of intercultural encounters in our age*. In particular two technological advancements have contributed to the compression of temporal and spatial distance by spurring development in two areas of human endeavour: *Transportation Systems* and *Communication Systems*. While the advancement of transportation facilities allows people to be increasingly mobile and effortlessly travel between countries and cultures, new communication systems similarly continue to encourage and facilitate cultural interaction. Samovar and Porter outline these significant changes in the media-landscape within only a few decades:

“Communication satellites, sophisticated television transmission equipment, and fiber optic or wireless connection systems permit people throughout the world to share information and ideas instantaneously. Cellular telephone service is expanding rapidly with as many as 50,000 new subscribers each day. The world now has 180 million personal computers and 1.2 billion television sets. The continued development and improvement of communication satellites has driven the expansion of the World Wide Web and the Internet computer network. Between 1988 and 1997 the number of Internet hosts grew from a few thousand to over 15 million. Currently, Internet traffic doubles every 100 days.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001)



Photograph by Thomas Nebbia, Woodfin Camp Associates.

Source: Samovar and Porter, 2001.

These technological developments, alongside with the progression of the wider socio-economical phenomenon of *globalization* have brought about a global inter-connectedness unprecedented in history. Consequently, as Spanish social-scientist Manuel Castells describes in his outstanding analysis of *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, dimensions of time and space have been compressed creating a “space of flows” as well as a state of instantaneity or as what he terms “timeless time.” (Castells, 2000) In *Spaces of Identity. Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* David Morley and Kevin Robins outline this phenomenon:

“Globalisation is about the compression of time and space horizons and the creation of a world of instantaneity and depthlessness. Global space is a space of flows, an electronic space, a decentered space, a space in which frontiers and boundaries have become permeable. Within this global arena, *economies and cultures are thrown into intense and immediate contact with each other* – with each ‘Other’ (an ‘Other’ that is no longer simply ‘out there’, but also within).” (Morley and Robins, 1995: 115. Emphasis mine.)

This situation exposes us to a new kind of cultural encounter and we need to find ways of dealing with the fact that we are now more interrelated with all of humanity than we were ever before. As a consequence of these developments in our age, to some extent the world can be regarded as a *single place* – not in a simplistic sense of a single world culture – but in terms of a *shared context* which impacts and influences on social relations as well as in respect of a *common frame of reference* within which social agents understand their existence, identity and actions. Featherstone analyses concisely:

“The flows of information, knowledge, money, commodities, people and images have intensified to the extent that *the sense of spatial difference which separated and insulated people from the need to take into account all the other people which make up what has become known as humanity has been eroded.*” (Featherstone, 1996: 87. Emphasis mine.)

Realizing this tight interrelation of global and local in our age is essential – furthermore as we cannot ignore the global anymore – it is coming to us. In consequence this “erosion of insulation” also confronts us with new challenges and the issue: *How do we come to terms with this end of insulation?*

As limit naturally stands for confinement, frontier and separation, it therefore also signifies recognition of the other, the different, the irreducible. The intense and immediate encounter with otherness, resulting from the permeability of boundaries in our age, is an experience that puts us to the test. It could be argued, that from it is born the temptation to reduce difference by force, while it may equally generate the challenge of communication as a constantly renewed endeavour.

This consideration is substantially at the core of this work, consequently proposing that this newly defined encounter with other cultures *requires a novel and conscious stance of openness towards communication.*

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

From a historical perspective, successful intercultural communication has been the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, today's intercultural encounters differ from earlier meetings, as they are more abundant and, because of the physical and social interconnectedness of people, nations and the world, more significant. Examples of such contexts are international business, international education or tourism – but there are also other, more pressing, reasons to make improvement of intercultural communication a priority.

In the face of the major challenges our world needs to react to today, including environmental crises, the spread of HIV-infections, and international criminal networks among others, a global alliance is needed to effectively encounter these problems which do not cease at national boundaries. Cooperation and effective communication across cultures is therefore an important priority to strive for in today's world.

However, in attempting to come to terms with this situation of intense and immediate contact with each other, reactionary efforts are currently being made towards re-insulation and avoiding genuine encounters – as for example through gated holiday resorts or by severe immigration politics. Nevertheless, it can be argued that building walls and fences is not a possibility in the long term – instead we need to make every effort towards establishing new and productive ways of communication. This is why I

propose that now more than ever we have an urgent need to increase our knowledge about other cultures and develop our skills in communicating across cultures in order to improve intercultural understanding. – On our way to the future *it is not gates we need to build, but bridges.*

As a starting point of this discussion we have now considered that at the dawn of the information age major advances in communication– and transportation systems have changed the ways people all over the world interact with and are exposed to encounters with other cultures. From this perspective, it can be argued that spatial and temporal distance have been compressed, creating a global common frame of reference and exposing people to intense and immediate contact with other cultures. Consequently, this dissolution of boundaries creates a need for improved and successful ways of intercultural communication – constituting the context this work is situated in.

Accordingly, this discussion has allowed us to establish the wider socio-cultural context of design as well as of this work. Moreover, it has helped to increase our awareness on the interrelatedness of such socio-cultural developments and the field of design in order to explore the questions this work raises from a broader point of view of society and culture.

## **B. COMMUNICATION: THE POWER OF DESIGN AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES**

Within the following section let us now reflect upon the role of cultural industries, including design and media industries, in the context of the socio-cultural developments outlined above. It can be argued that design in all its forms is interrelated to its socio-cultural context in complex ways as a major *producer of cultural artefacts*. Within this work I will primarily concentrate on the role of design in the form of visual communication – consisting of screen-based and graphic design – and its application within the realms of the World Wide Web, (electronic) media

and advertising.<sup>1</sup> These cultural industries contribute significantly in the production of culture, and it could hence be argued that designers engaging in this field have power and, therefore, responsibility.

## 1. THE POWER OF DESIGN

Visual communication has a powerful role within society and culture, closely involved with the production of meaning – giving (visual) form to values, creating needs, determining what is desirable as well as shaping images and representations of the world. As media professionals we must be aware of this power of design.

*The Power of Design* was also the name of the 2003 conference of AIGA, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, which was concerned with examining the collaborative and cross-disciplinary aspects of designing in the 21st century, asking questions that are also relevant in this context, such as “What is the designer’s social responsibility on both a local and global level?” and “How can designers use words and images to improve understanding across different cultures?” The description of the conference affirms:

“Designers are incredibly powerful. We have a hand in creating the communications, experiences and artifacts that shape our world and growing influence on decisions affecting the quality of life for millions of people. [...] As the makers of artifacts, messages and experiences, designers are powerful creators of culture as well as participants in it.”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. IMPROVING ACCESS

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, sees the cultural industries – including publishing music, audiovisual technology, electronics, video games and the Internet – as a focal point for culture in the future which is steadily growing apace. Accordingly, their “international dimension gives them a determining role for the future in terms of freedom of expression, cultural diversity

and economic development.” Nevertheless, we must consider that even though “the globalization of exchange and new technologies opens up exciting new prospects, it also creates new types of inequality. The world map of cultural industries reveals a yawning gap between North and South. This can only be counteracted by strengthening local capacities and facilitating access to global markets at national level by way of new partnerships, know-how, control of piracy and increased international solidarity of every kind.” (UNESCO Culture Sector, 2004)

This of course brings us to the issues of the so-called *Digital Divide* which is contributing to even expand the gap existing between developing and developed nations within this world. While the “First World” is moving into the Information Age with accelerated pace, developing nations are endangered of being even further left behind, facing much more immediate challenges. In her analysis for the *UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development* “Culture and the New Media Technologies” Sally Jane Norman concisely describes this problematic, arguing that

“the considerable attention paid to these technologies by user countries almost systematically undermines the fact that most of the earth’s inhabitants are still oblivious to and beyond the reach of these tools. Inequality on our planet, notably in terms of technological status, is nothing new, but is today ironically highlighted by hype surrounding new media, all too often championed for their ‘universal’ portent. Yet new media technologies will not represent any ‘universal’ benefits unless we manage to reduce the gap between the info-rich and the info-poor; the humanist potential of these tools entirely depends on access. That said, their potential is huge, as modern communication and information infrastructures allow social reorganisation which short-circuits geographic and legislative frontiers that are the mainstay of national and economic hierarchies. Not since the invention of the printing press have we been so powerfully equipped to transform social practices at every level. But catch phrase comparisons of the digital and Gutenberg revolutions overlook one thing : now, as then, hundreds of thousands of millions of people do not know how to read and write.” (Norman, 1995)



According to Norman, the ability of new media technologies to contribute to key sectors like education reinforces the urgency of their wider implantation. While

“[c]omputer literacy can neither precede nor replace conventional literacy skills, [...] it can valorise them by enabling those who have acquired them to consolidate and exchange knowledge through vast, multicultural, responsive information spaces.” (Norman, 1995)

Furthermore, information technologies can be applied to establish and reinforce *cultural identity*, which is a condition of effective social integration, as well as to lead welded cultural groups to assume active social roles. (Norman, 1995)

Responding to these challenges the *World Summit on the Information Society* took place from 10–12 December 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland, concerned with issues of “Building the Information Society: A Global Challenge in the New Millenium”. In *Our Common Vision of the Information Society* the representatives of the peoples of the world declared the

“common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” (Declaration of Principles WSIS, 2003)

Furthermore, they declared to be also

“fully aware that the benefits of the information technology revolution are today unevenly distributed between the developed and developing countries and within societies. We are fully committed to turning this digital divide into a digital opportunity for all, particularly for those who risk being left behind and being further marginalized.” (Declaration of Principles WSIS, 2003)

As related to the context of this work, I am convinced that as designers and media professionals practicing within the cultural industries we are primary stakeholders with the power to contribute to meeting these challenges. Knowledge and skills in

intercultural design in turn will equip us with the necessary foundation. According to the key principles expressed in *An Information Society For All*, all stakeholders should work together to

“improve access to information and communication infrastructure and technologies as well as to information and knowledge; [...]; create an enabling environment at all levels; [...]; foster and respect cultural diversity; recognize the role of the media; address the ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and encourage international and regional cooperation. [...] [T]hese are the key principles for building an inclusive Information Society.” (Declaration of Principles WSIS, 2003)

### 3. THE ROLE OF DESIGN

For these reasons, I propose that the world of design has the responsibility to increase its knowledge and skills in intercultural design – in order to improve access and inclusiveness as well as to promote the value of cultural diversity. Moving towards this direction design plays an important role in *improving dialogue and understanding across cultures*.

We have seen above that as a consequence of the increased global interrelatedness and more immediate contact of people on this planet, successful intercultural communication and collaboration becomes a major priority in the world we are living in. The role of design is to *create such a positive and fruitful environment* for such encounters to take place, by promoting mutual respect and celebrating cultural diversity.

Without doubt, in reality encounters between cultures can be very challenging and complicated to say the least, considering the problematic political history some share. It would be naïve to believe that design can bypass such existing and profound conflicts. From this perspective, the power of design is clearly very limited. Nevertheless, I argue that design *can* make a difference in establishing a culture which expresses the value of diversity and in creating representational practices which acknowledge respect for other cultures and world-views.

Currently, as we will explore later in this work, designers are still only in the beginning of this road and much work needs to be done to improve awareness and encourage critical reflection in cross-cultural issues. Even more, in some cases we will examine critically that current design practices, not only neglect access and inclusiveness – but even contribute to *hinder* intercultural respect and understanding by promoting shallow stereotypes and reinforcing systematics of domination and global inequalities.

Consequently, this exploration aims to appeal to designers to open their horizons and consider as well the socio-cultural context which affects our field as the ethical implications which result from our work. In this sense, the above discussion on communication has drawn attention to the fact that information technologies are globally unevenly distributed creating new types of inequalities – and has consequently outlined international efforts to create a more inclusive information society. Awareness of these problematics of digital media is significant to this work as intercultural design can play an important part in improving access and inclusiveness. In this sense, improving their knowledge and understanding of designing across cultures designers can contribute to facing these challenges.

## C. CULTURE: GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL FLOWS

Taking a closer look on the ways in which the socio-cultural context contemporary design is operating in is shaped by the phenomenon of globalization, let us now consider the impact of globalized cultural flows on cultures all over the world. The following discussion proposes that the socio-cultural developments outlined in the sections above – in which, as we have seen, design plays a powerful role – cannot be examined without considering the context of power in which they are situated. Engaging in intercultural design an understanding of these dimensions of power and cultural influence, in which design is closely involved, is from my perspective significant.

## 1. TRANSCULTURALITY

As a starting point of this discussion it is useful to consider the very complexity of cultures today. In this sense, let us explore how the concept of culture itself has been transformed, as expressed through the notion of *transculturality* introduced by German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch. Welsch argues that the traditional concepts of single cultures as well as of multiculturalism which conceive of cultures as islands or spheres are not appropriate for today's cultural conditions which are largely characterized by mixes and permeations. He describes transculturality as a "consequence of the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures*" as well as "*cultures' external networking*. Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other" as a consequence of "migratory processes, as well as of worldwide material and immaterial communications systems and economic interdependencies and dependencies." This is, of course, also where questions of power come in. (Welsch, 1999)

Furthermore, Welsch identifies cultures today as being characterized by *hybridization*:

"[T]here is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively 'own' either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others [...]. Today, in a culture's internal relations – among its different ways of life – there exists as much foreignness as in its external relations with other cultures." (Welsch, 1999)

The developments outlined here could be regarded as having significant impact on cultural production and we will explore its relations to the field of design further below.

Taking into consideration these basic conditions on a culturally interpenetrated planet with significant interdependencies as put forward by Welsch, let us now continue by examining the *directions and terms of these increased cultural flows*.

## 2. POWER AND DOMINATION: PATTERNS OF CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

In the following discussion we will take into account the fact that the relationships of interdependent cultures within our world cannot be regarded in a contextual vacuum but are clearly situated in a framework of *power*. Considering the project of globalization we need to pay attention to the *complexity of change* as well as understand that *change involves agency* – and, therefore, *power*.

Within the discourse of Cultural Studies critical examinations argue that the project of globalization has continued to establish a very specific worldwide power-relationship where the countries of the so-called “First World” assume a role of domination over the other nations. Shohat and Stam argue in this context that

“[...] discernible patterns of domination channel the ‘fluidities’ even of a ‘multipolar’ world; the same hegemony that unifies the world through global networks of circulating goods and information also distributes them according to hierarchical structures of power, even if those hegemonies are now more subtle and dispersed. It is often forgotten that ‘globalization’ is not a new development, that it must be seen as part of the much longer history of colonialism. Although colonization per se preexisted European colonialism, having been practiced by Greece, Rome, the Aztecs, the Incas, and many other groups, what was new in European colonialism is its planetary reach, its affiliation with global institutional power, and its imperative mode, its attempted submission of the world to a single ‘universal’ regime of truth and power.”  
(Shohat and Stam, 1996)

According to this, within cultural studies there are critical discourses which put forward that globalization in fact operates as a mechanism of *cultural imperialism* exercised by the ‘West’ in an extension of former colonial domination. Milinani Trask, Pacific Representative to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Hawaiian attorney and Indigenous human rights law specialist, confirms this view from the indigenous perspective, expressing that “[c]olonisation is the mother of globalisation. The history of Indigenous peoples is a history of profound culture-clash. Today we have a new form of oppression of North over South.” (Trask, 2003)

Therefore, as Shohat and Stam already pointed out, the project of globalization must be examined within a historical context which played a role in preparing the way for current developments:

“Imperialism did not maintain its rule merely through suppression, but through the export and institutionalization of European ways of life, organizational structures, values and interpersonal relations, language and cultural products that often remained and continued to have impact even once the imperialists themselves had gone home. In short, imperialism was itself a multi-faceted cultural process which laid the ground for the ready acceptance and adoption of mediated cultural products which came much, much later.”

(Sreberny–Mohammadi, 1997)

Related to this, we need to take into consideration that *while culture is produced everywhere, not everybody enjoys the power resources to project culture to a broader, or even global, audience*. In consequence the process of cultural imperialism, or “cultural synchronization” as Hamelink preferred to call it,

“implies that a particular type of cultural development in the metropolitan country is persuasively communicated to the receiving countries. Cultural synchronization implies that the traffic of cultural products goes massively in one direction and has basically a synchronic mode”.

(Hamelink in Sreberny–Mohammadi, 1997)

Robins argues according to this that

“[f]or all that it has projected itself as transhistorical and transnational, as the transcendent and universalizing force of modernization and modernity, global capitalism has in reality been about westernization – the export of western commodities, values, priorities, ways of life” (Robins in Barker, 2002)

In different contexts, Westernization is attributed with different focus, more specifically as a project of Americanization, or “Coca-Colonization” leading towards the creation of a so-called “McWorld”. Schiller expresses this view criticising U.S. media-cultural dominance in “Not Yet the Post-Imperialist Era”: “Domination is precisely what cultural imperialism is all about. With that domination comes the definitional power [...] that sets the boundaries for national discourse.” (Schiller, 1991)

Drawing from such critical analyses as put forward in the discourse of cultural studies as well as media theory I have introduced arguments which examine inequalities in global cultural flows and demand globalization to be considered in a historical context of domination. It could moreover be argued from such a critical point of view that among others design and media could be identified as tools manifesting specific global power relationships. Accordingly, this discussion suggests that an understanding of certain power contexts which frame the work of design as cultural artefact production, is significant to designing across cultures. Therefore, media professionals operating in “Western” countries ought to be aware of the introduced theories of cultural imperialism in order to establish a more reflexive practice.

### 3. HOMOGENIZATION VERSUS “NEW DIVERSITY”

Resulting from the considerations above we can raise the question: “What are the consequences of mainly one-way cultural flows in relation to culture in general and design specifically?” The following reflections on tendencies towards cultural convergence and *homogenization* versus opposed dynamics of *hybridization* will lay the ground for our later questions concerning design and homogenization. Furthermore, they aim to outline problematics resulting from the global distribution of commodities including cultural products.

While the historical development of capitalist economies has always had profound implications for cultures, identities and ways of life, the globalization of economic activity is now associated with a further wave of cultural transformation – with a process of *cultural globalization*. The manufacture of universal cultural products, a process which has of course been developing for a long time, plays a role at one level.

“In the new cultural industries, there is a belief - to use Saatchi terminology- in ‘world cultural convergence’; a belief in the convergence of lifestyle, culture and behaviour among consumer segments across the world. This faith in the emergence of a ‘shared culture’ and a common ‘world awareness’ appears to be vindicated by the success of products like Dallas or Batman and by such attractions as Disneyland. According to the president of Euro Disneyland, Disney’s characters are universal.” (Morley and Robins, 1995: 111)

In any case, such assumptions of proposed universality need to be handled with care, considering the straight-forward business goals of certain cultural industries. Critically viewed, global cultural productions and image exports are in fact involved in *creating* such a common world taste around common logos, advertising slogans, stars, songs, brand names, jingles and trademarks. According to this, the principle agents of cultural synchronization are said to be transnational corporations:

“The creators of this universal cultural space are the new global cultural corporations. In an environment of enormous opportunities and escalating costs, what is clearer than ever before is the relation between size and power. What we are seeing in the cultural industries is a recognition of the advantages of scale, and in this sphere too, it is giving rise to an explosion of mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances. The most dynamic actors are rapidly restructuring to ensure strategic control of a range of cultural products across world markets.” (Morley and Robins, 1995: 112)

According to the implications of such concentration of power and control of cultural production – which is moreover geographically specifically situated – the cultural homogenization thesis proposes that the globalization of consumer capitalism has led to a loss of cultural diversity, effecting the growth of ‘sameness’ while decreasing cultural autonomy.

In any case, if the origination of world-standardized cultural products is one key strategy, the process of globalization is more complex and diverse. In reality, it is not possible to eradicate or transcend difference, and the other side of this discourse proposes that globalization is not a simple process of homogenization as the “forces of fragmentation and hybridity are equally strong.” (Barker, 2002)

In *Globalisation as Hybridisation* Jan Nederveen Pieterse points out the emergence of hybrid sites and spaces as an example for this phenomenon, like global cities which contain an ethnic *mélange* of neighbourhoods. He argues accordingly:

“Cultural experiences, past or present, have not been simply moving in the direction of cultural uniformity and standardization. This is not to say that the notion of global cultural synchronization [...] is irrelevant – on the contrary – but it is fundamentally incomplete. It overlooks the countercurrents – the



impact non-Western cultures have been making on the West. It downplays the ambivalence of the globalizing momentum and ignores the role of local reception of Western culture – for example the indiginization of Western elements.” (Nederveen Pieterse, 1990)

## THE NATURE OF CULTURAL FLOWS

Taking into account these different perspectives of global cultural flows, we generally need to acknowledge the complex nature of globalization. Appadurai (1990) has argued in this context that contemporary global conditions are best characterized in terms of complex, overlapping and disjunctive flows of *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes* and *ideoscapes*. According to this disjunctive order,

“globalization involves the dynamic movements of ethnic groups, technology, financial transactions, media images and ideological conflicts that are not neatly determined by one harmonious ‘master plan’. Rather, the speed, scope and impact of these flows are fractured and disconnected.” (Barker, 2002)

Appadurai furthermore describes the fluidity and irregular shapes of these landscapes emphasizing that they are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision – but are rather “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.” (Appadurai, 1990)

Summarizing these views of global cultural conditions we can conclude that

“[m]etaphors of uncertainty, contingency and chaos are replacing those of order, stability and systematicity. Global cultural flows cannot be understood through neat sets of linear determinations but are better comprehended as a series of overlapping, over-determined, complex and chaotic conditions.” (Appadurai in Barker, 2002)

Accepting this as the fundamental situation of our exploration, let us come back to examining the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization – what Appadurai (1990) terms as the “central problem of today’s global interactions”.

In his description of transculturality Welsch puts forward that in reality it does not result in uniformization but instead is intrinsically linked with the production of *diversity*. In his view, while diversity as traditionally provided in the form of single cultures, is indeed increasingly disappearing but giving way, however, to a new type of diversity. This “new diversity” takes shape through the variety of cultures and life-forms which are arising from transcultural permeations. (Welsch, 1999) According to Welsch,

“[t]he transcultural webs are [...] woven with different threads, and in different manner. Therefore, on the level of transculturality, a high degree of cultural manifoldness results again – it is certainly no smaller than that which was found between traditional single cultures. It’s just that now the differences no longer come about through a juxtaposition of clearly delineated cultures (like in a mosaic), but result between transcultural networks, which have some things in common while differing in others, showing overlaps and distinctions at the same time.” (Welsch, 1999)

This concept of a new kind of diversity resulting from the complex interconnectedness of cultural flows today is similarly relevant to our later reflections on homogenization versus diversity in the context of design and media.

Concluding this discussion of homogenization versus hybridization let us now return to examine these phenomena within the context of power. Considering dynamics towards hybridization we need to look closer and ask: *What are the conditions under which cultural interplay and permeation take place?*

What is missing in terms such as “global melange” is the “acknowledgement of the actual unevenness, asymmetry and inequality in global relations.” (Nederveen Pieterse, 1990) In considering counter-currents to homogenization in local reception of Western culture, such as indigenization, we must not neglect the obvious existence of certain cultural pressure in the first place, which consequently leads to those acts of hybridized subversion. As Nederveen Pieterse (1990) points out,

“[h]ybridity functions [...] as part of a power relationship between centre and margin, hegemony and minority, and indicates a blurring, destabilization or subversion of that hierarchical relationship.”

Therefore in my view we need to acknowledge the existence of such a hierarchical relationship in the contemporary exchange of global cultural flows, in the majority of cases with the “First World” assuming a position of cultural transmitters and the “rest of the world” reduced to a role of cultural receivers.

Summarizing these reflections on tendencies towards cultural homogenization in contraposition to cultural hybridization I abide by Appadurai’s analysis that,

“[t]he globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization, but globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing styles and the like) which are absorbed into local political and cultural economies [...]”  
(Appadurai, 1990)

This section has been concerned with introducing analyses from cultural theory which suggest two opposed phenomena resulting from the global distribution of cultural products combined with profound inequalities in actual power relations: the homogenization versus the hybridization of cultures. Moreover it has presented Appadurai’s model which suggests a complex, overlapping and disjunctive nature of cultural flows in our age, and outlined arguments that these will originate a new form of diversity. These reflections will build our foundation for further examinations on related issues, such as the question in which ways contemporary design is related to cultural homogenization.

Throughout this whole section I have outlined that as a result of increased cultural flows the conditions of cultures today are complex, shaped by a high degree of permeation. Nevertheless, as we have seen this high level of exchange does not necessarily occur on equal terms. Drawing attention to this fact I have introduced theories from the social science discourse which criticize the globalization of cultural flows for originating a new form of imperialism and domination. According to those analyses, cultures all over the world respond to these pressures with two divergent developments: homogenization of cultures versus their hybridization.

From my perspective these phenomena occurring on a wider global scale are tightly related to design which can in numerous cases be identified to manifest certain structures of power (as we will examine further in the section on Representation in chapter three). Even more when engaging in intercultural design I see an increased need to consider its socio-cultural conditions and influences, as failure to do so might result in naïve or insensitive design solutions. This approach seems even more significant as *design literature shows a profound lack in critical discussions of intercultural design within the context of power*. – In fact, I realized during my research that designing across cultures is in general predominantly treated in terms of technical or formal problematics, especially within the discourse of Human Computer Interaction and also in most cases in Graphic Design. Issues of power, which obviously have relevance on the threshold between cultures, are excluded from the design discourse, seemingly as a taboo, keeping designers ignorant on these dimensions of their work. Therefore, this work aims to raise questions on these issues as related to design practice drawing from critical traditions in other disciplines in order to start a dialogue within the discourse of design.

#### D. DESIGN AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY: REPRESENTING REALITIES

Crossing these turbulent waters of globalization we are asking ourselves: how does this journey relate to the field of design? *Why are such critical reflections important for us as designers?* – Considering the above analyses on socio-cultural developments let us now explore interrelations of these phenomena with design raising questions on homogenization and cultural diversity within our field.

During my research and with an increased awareness on intercultural issues in design, I began to notice that design which is visible in the “international design scene” is likely to originate from either Europe, North America, Japan or Australia, while work from other countries or continents appears much harder to come across. This made me wonder why this is the case. Consider when you have last seen work published by a designer from Thailand or Argentina in a design book or magazine, and when you have last listened to a Lebanese or Indian professional at a design conference. These

are just examples of course, but the questions are: Do nations in different parts of the world have no design community? Is there no interesting work coming from there? – Or, rather, if there is indeed interesting and valuable work produced outside the “developed” world –why is it not visible within the international contemporary design scene?

Why are design publications, web communities or conferences restricting themselves only to a certain design culture which originates in a majority from “Western” countries, and that can be regarded to a certain degree homogenous in their aesthetics and form of expression? Japan is of course the only exception and it is refreshing to see a profound difference in conceptual and aesthetic approach. From my perspective and personal experience, after discussing with colleagues from Asia and South America, the current situation appears to be that first of all there are indeed evolving and sometimes flourishing design communities in developing nations which are very much exposed to what is produced in “Western” culture. Within the so-called “First World” though there seems to be a lack of awareness and openness of what is really produced *internationally*. In this sense, the “West” is restricting itself to a *monoculture* blocking inspirations from outside as well as cultural diversity. Personally, I see this as a profound loss as cultural diversity has great richness to offer, especially when it comes to creativity and artistic expression.

Nevertheless, from this perspective, the discussion on cultural homogenization is indeed very relevant to the field of design. In this context we can raise questions like: In how far is contemporary visual design in the West following uniform trends and aesthetics? Or, conversely, *how much cultural diversity is visible in contemporary visual design?*

If we look enough we can of course find projects which are dedicated to celebrate cultural diversity in visual expression, but they are everything but the majority. Two exceptional recent publications in this context are *Latino: America Grafica* published by “Die Gestalten” which features the vivid contemporary design work produced in Latin and South America, as well as the project *WorldWideDesigners.2007* which is an attempt to exhibit visual expression from all over the globe. Even though the latter one is explicitly dedicated to expose cultural diversity in design and features therefore

a wide range of international contributions, it still illustrates my point quite well. The proportions of featured designers leave many questions: <sup>3</sup>

Among the 143 participating designers, there are (according to UNESCO Regions <sup>4</sup>):

- + 14 from *Asia and the Pacific* including Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea, the Russian Federation and *one* from India;
- + 2 from *Africa*, representing South Africa as well as Zimbabwe;
- + 12 from *Latin America and the Caribbean* (Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela).
- + *Arab States* are not represented at all.

In total 28 designers are participating from Latin America/Caribbean, Africa and Asia/Pacific (excluding Australia and New Zealand) *taken together* – while 116 are featured from North America, Europe and Australia. This proportion in a book which is actually *devoted* to represent world-wide design speaks for itself. In fact, other publications often named “Contemporary Design” or similar could only dream of such proportions. Nevertheless, this example does not want to diminish the efforts of *WorldWideDesigners.2007* in any way but simply draw attention to my point, in what I see as a common phenomenon in design publications. The reasons for this are certainly complex and cannot be simplified here, but I would just like to raise awareness that this issue exists.

Altogether I consider the mentioned projects outstanding in their effort to give exposure and international visibility to diverse forms of visual expression. It is also refreshing to see the featured work expressing the unique cultural background and socio-political circumstances of their country of origin. In any case, some examples do seem in my opinion strongly oriented to what I call here “Western established design” trends and aesthetics, if not to the point of mimicking these influences. – Which brings us back to our reflections on homogenization versus diversity as related to the field of design.

From another point of view one could moreover ask not only if contemporary design has itself a tendency towards homogenization, but if design consequently as a producer of cultural artefacts *contributes on a global level to homogenize cultures*.

As we have seen before, design is a powerful creator of culture defining and establishing representations of reality, hence within the chapter on *Intercultural Design* we will further explore the question: Do visual design and media contribute to a world-wide phenomenon of cultural homogenization?

Throughout this section we have related our prior discussion on cultural homogenization to the field of design, critically reviewing contemporary design publications which appear strongly centred on work produced in North America, Europe or Japan often restricting inclusiveness of culturally diverse international contributions. This point has been illustrated by comparing the proportions of featured designers within a publication which is explicitly dedicated to represent world-wide design. These reflections have served us to apply our prior discussion on tendencies towards cultural homogenization on a wider level of cultures as affecting the field of design in specific, considering questions arising from these dynamics.

During this chapter we have now outlined recent social, cultural and technological developments which had major impact on numerous people in various nations around the world, hence transforming the socio-cultural context design is operating in. In this sense, we have explored the novel qualities of intercultural encounters in the information age which increase the need of improving our skills as successful intercultural communicators. Outlining the power of design and the role of design and media could play in improving access to information technologies, it has been furthermore proposed that designers can play a valuable part contributing to a more inclusive information society, by providing for more cultural diversity within their practice. Consequently we have considered the socio-cultural context of intercultural design as it is situated within a context of power, introducing critical discussions on Western cultural imperialism in the exchange of global cultural flows, drawing from the discourse of Cultural Studies. Exploring related theories which suggest trends towards global cultural convergence or homogenization which are subverted by dynamics of hybridization, we hence reflected on these developments within design questioning the level of cultural diversity exhibited in the field.

The discussions throughout this chapter have therefore allowed us to embed our discussion of intercultural design which this work is dedicated to, within the dynamic socio-cultural context it is situated in. This is significant, as this work proposes that intercultural design is interrelated with its socio-cultural environment in complex ways and it is therefore useful to consider a variety of perspectives, broadening our horizons through a multidisciplinary approach. Furthermore, developing a stance of critical reflexivity by considering the context of power on the threshold between culture will serve as foundation for our further explorations on cross-cultural representation in chapter three.

At this point, nevertheless, let us shift our perspective for the next chapter which will approach intercultural design from a different direction – as a specific case of communication across cultures.

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE:

<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, throughout this work when using the term “design” I refer in most cases to “visual communication” and “screen-based design”.

<sup>2</sup> THE POWER OF DESIGN CONFERENCE: <http://powerofdesign.aiga.org/content.cfm/topicscategory> (February 23, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See in this context the publication’s website: <http://www.wwd07.com> (March 9, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> According to <http://www.unesco.org> (February 26, 2004).



## II. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

“We’re certainly well versed in technology. Technology is actually an easy thing to learn, study, work with and become a master of. What’s more interesting to me, and what is harder to understand, is how people are people, how they relate to each other and how they relate to themselves. Certainly as a designer, that’s the least amount of my training, and so I find that the most interesting area. *People are infinitely more interesting, variable and chaotic than any technology we have ever developed. It seems a deeper, more difficult subject to dive into and learn more from.* “

NATHAN SHEDROFF, “Interaction Design is Like a Good Party.” (Emphasis mine.)

In this sense, the following chapter is dedicated to introducing basic ideas on culture and communication as understood in the context of this work, laying the ground for our later discussions. Exploring intercultural communication in general will provide us with a foundation which allows deeper insights for its specific case of intercultural design. To begin with, let us strive for gaining a basic understanding of how affects us, shaping our perceptions and world-view, which will be useful in order to find successful design solutions for cultures other than our own.

Intercultural design is, as I see it, much more complex than choosing appropriate colours or symbols. There can be no overall rules or formulas, but every project will demand its own specific approach and dedicated research. Interest in, and respect for other ways of perceiving and interacting with our world will be helpful in creating successful intercultural designs.

In this sense, it should be useful as a start to briefly analyse how we are all shaped by culture. Recognizing how we see the world through the lens of our own culture, and therefore being able to reflect on our own perspective and situatedness is invaluable in intercultural communication as well as intercultural design. As Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall state concisely, “to understand others, we must also understand ourselves.” (Hall, 1990)

Let this therefore be our main aim throughout this chapter. Introducing several aspects of intercultural communication I will discuss the renowned work of Geert Hofstede as well as of Edward T. and Mildred Reed Hall, after I have given a brief outline of the concepts of culture and communication, according to the work *Communication Between Cultures* by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter.

## A. STUDYING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CHALLENGES

But before we turn to the concept of culture itself let us first direct our attention to several problematics concerning studies in the intercultural field. There are two main factors which make us vulnerable to distortions: the failure to recognize the uniqueness of the individual and the inability to be objective.

### 1. INDIVIDUAL UNIQUENESS

As human beings we share common universal experiences just by being alive. We share universal needs as well as common emotions such as fear, love, anger, hostility, shame, envy, guilt, grief and joy. With the members of our culture we additionally share certain cultural patterns – culture offers us a *common frame of reference*.

Nevertheless, we are much more than our culture – we are thinking individuals with the potential to engage in free choice. With studies in the intercultural field it is important to keep in mind this individual uniqueness, understanding that

“the values and behaviors of a particular culture may not be the values and behaviors of all the individuals within that culture. Each human being is unique and shaped by countless factors, culture being but one.”

(Samovar and Porter, 2001: 17)

## 2. OBJECTIVITY

Studying intercultural communication we must also be aware that we are always “subject to the implicit perceptions of [our] own culture. Whether willingly or unconsciously, [we] look at any new culture through eyes conditioned from birth to see things in a particular way.” (Hall, 1990) This *inability to be truly objective in intercultural encounters* is a problem impossible to completely overcome: We study other cultures from the perspective of our own culture, which constitutes our frame of reference, and consequently our observations and conclusions are tainted by our cultural orientation. This *ethnocentrism* is unconscious and therefore often difficult to identify.

Being aware of these challenges, let us make an effort – when engaging in design across cultures – to recognize and avoid the hazards of intercultural communication: over-generalizing and forgetting how complex the nature of human behaviour is.

### B. CONCEPTS AND CHARACTERISTICS: COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The following discussion on concepts and characteristics will help us to build a thorough foundation on which to base our deeper explorations as well as to clarify what we are talking about.

Communication and culture are directly linked. Culture is learned, acted out, transmitted, and preserved through communication. By the same token, *culture conditions us towards one particular mode of communication over another*. As designers – being professional communicators – we should always be aware of this fact.

## 1. COMMUNICATION

### DEFINING COMMUNICATION

A definition of the term “communication” which is useful for our context has been put forward by Rubin and Stewart:

“Human communication is the process through which individuals - in relationships, groups, organizations, and societies - respond to and create messages to adopt to the environment and one another.”

(Rubin et al. in Samovar and Porter, 2001)

### SOME PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION

Samovar and Porter (2001) laid out several principles of communication from which I found it useful to include the following three in this context as being relevant to intercultural design:

#### *a. Communication Is Symbolic*

Inherent in our definition of communication is the fact that humans are symbol-making creatures. In millions of years of physical evolution and thousands of years of cultural evolution we have developed the ability to generate, receive, store and manipulate symbols – thus allowing for everyday interaction as well as culture being passed on from generation to generation. In terms of intercultural communication we must keep in mind the fact that the symbols we use are discretionary and subjective.

“The important thing to remember is that symbols are symbols only because a group of people agree to consider them as such. There is not a natural connection between symbols and their referents : the relationships are *arbitrary* and vary from culture to culture.”

(Samovar and Porter, 2001. Emphasis mine)

As symbols are at the core of communication it consequently becomes one of our main challenges as visual communicators to translate symbols across cultures in meaningful ways.

*b. Communication Is Systemic*

This principle acknowledges that “[c]ommunication does not occur in a vacuum, but is part of a larger system”. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 25) Elements of this system include setting, location, occasion, time and number of participants. Controlling the setting is a major aspect of design, which becomes a specially sensitive issue when transferred over cultures. “*Communication always occurs in context, and the nature of communication depends in large measure on this context.*” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 25. Emphasis mine.) The power of context, especially when it comes to intercultural design, is an issue we will explore further within the following chapters.

*c. Communication Has A Consequence*

From my point of view the most important characteristic of communication, when applied to the field of design, is that communication has a consequence. The act of communication produces change in people. I suggest therefore that as professional communicators we have responsibility for the power inherent in our messages and must consider the ethical consequences of communication actions.

## 2. CULTURE

Culture is ubiquitous , multidimensional, complex and all-pervasive. Its basic function is to provide us with structure, fulfilling people’s primary needs on three levels: *basic needs* (food, shelter, physical protection), *derived needs* (organization of work, distribution of food, defence, social control) and *integrative needs* (psychological security, social harmony, purpose in life). Throughout this work when employing the term “culture” I am referring to it in an ethnic sense. Although subcultures and cultures of use are clearly significant and need to be considered in the context of design – this discussion would take us too far here.

### DEFINING CULTURE

Naturally, the term culture can be defined and understood in countless ways. In order to clarify the concept within the context of this work we can apply the following definition of “culture” as proposed by A. J . Marsella:

“Culture is shared learned behaviour which is transmitted from one generation to another for purposes of promoting individual and social survival, adaptation, and growth and development. Culture has both external (e.g., artefacts, roles, institutions) and internal representations (e.g., values, attitudes, beliefs, cognitive/affective/sensory styles, consciousness patterns, and epistemologies.)” (Marsella in Samovar and Porter, 2001)

### SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

The following characteristics of culture outlined by Samovar and Porter (2001) I consider relevant in the context of this work:

#### *a. Culture Is Learned*

The notion of learning is the single most important characteristic of culture. Without the advantages of learning from those who lived before, we would not have culture. Culture contains “the group’s knowledge stored up (in memories, books and objects) for future use”. (Samovar and Porter, 2001)

The term “enculturation” describes the “conscious or unconscious conditioning occurring within that process whereby the individual, as child and adult, achieves competence in a particular culture.” This learning takes place through *interaction*, *observation* and *imitation*. Moreover, *essential messages of culture get reinforced and repeated*: We learn our culture from a large variety of sources, including Proverbs, Legends, Myths, Art and Mass media. (Samovar and Porter, 2001)

#### *b. Culture Is Subject to Change*

Cultures are constantly being confronted with ideas and information from outside sources; but although many aspects of culture are subject to change, according to Samovar and Porter, the deep structure of a culture resists major alteration. This assumption needs to be regarded critically nevertheless, as we have seen in our discussions before that current socio-political changes, due to global influences are fundamental in many parts of the world. The question is: how would we actually measure profound changes in the deep structures of culture?

According to these characteristics we can gain an understanding of how culture functions as a shared system, which is learned and constantly re-enforced.

#### CULTURE AS TACIT KNOWLEDGE

An important aspect to realize is that “most of culture is automatic and subconscious”. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 33) As Hall points out concisely, “[c]ulture *hides more than it reveals*, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its *own participants*.” (Hall, 1990: 60. Emphasis mine) This idea of culture being an immersive system can be visualized by the model of a diver in an ocean of culture. We metaphorically “breathe” our culture, being so immersed in it as our “natural” environment that it becomes almost impossible to recognize unless we focus on it with constant efforts. It is this quality of culture which naturally causes most problematics when we are engaged in intercultural communication: Many cultural perceptions, like thought patterns, value systems etc., are so ingrained in us that we cannot distance ourselves in order to articulate them or experience different perspectives.

In *The Tacit Dimension* Michael Polanyi proposes to “reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that *we can know more than we can tell*.” (Polanyi, 1983: 4) This idea of tacit knowledge certainly can be applied to most of culture, as we are *unable to articulate* or define many of the inherent qualities and basic assumptions of our own culture and, by the same token, it is impossible to simply ask members of other cultures to explain their deep cultural patterns. Many aspects of culture are unconscious and belong to our tacit knowledge.

On the other hand, we should be aware that this tacit dimension in fact constitutes the *very purpose* of culture: immersing us in a given structure in which we can lead our lives without having to constantly reconsider its central assumptions. Transcending cultural boundaries we need to have an understanding of these subconscious qualities of culture.

The concept of tacit knowledge has additionally relevance for our professional skills as designers, as our creative process is often founded on our tacit knowledge

and cannot be articulated or explained easily. As well as our cultural knowledge our professional knowledge is often based on a “silent” patterns of unquestioned assumptions – this combination can turn out to be problematic in intercultural design. For example, when choosing an image we could be motivated by our creative sense of “what looks good” in terms of colours and shapes as well as by our cultural assumptions of “what is considered beautiful or desirable” – with both factors side-stepping the aware choices which are often important in intercultural design. In this sense it is essential to keep in mind these tacit and unconscious dimensions of cultural knowledge, and designers need to pay special attention to recognize them in their own practice in order to reconsider their validity for the specific target audience.

#### DOMINANT CULTURE AND CO-CULTURES

Referring to the term “culture” as applied to a societal group, we need to distinguish within each society between the dominant culture and the numerous co-cultures and specialized cultures. Accordingly, I am using the term “culture”, as described by Samovar and Porter (2001), referring to the dominant culture found in most societies. I prefer the term dominant over others such as umbrella or mainstream culture as it clearly indicates that the culture we are talking about is the one in power.

*The people in power are those who historically have controlled, and who still control, the major institutions within the culture: Church – Government – Education – Military – Mass media – Monetary systems, and the like.* Samovar and Porter argue that,

“[in the United States] white Males must meet the requirements of dominance. They are in positions of power in every single major institution in this country. They are at the centre of culture because their power enables them to *determine and manipulate the content and flow of the messages produced by those institutions.* By controlling most of the cultural messages, they are also *controlling the images presented to the majority of the population.* Whether it be the church, mass media, or the government, the dominant culture sets goals, perpetuates customs, establishes values, and makes the major decisions affecting the bulk of the population. Their power allows them to influence what people think, what they aspire to be and what they talk about.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 12. Emphasis mine)



This analysis gives invaluable insights connected to our prior discussions on cultural flows and domination – recognizing the close interrelation between the exercise of power and the control of cultural messages, as put forward in this analysis, leads us to an understanding which is essential for this whole work. Shedding a new light on the power inherent in the production of cultural messages and representations, as media professionals we need to pay attention to these close links between the control of images and messages and the establishment and re-enforcement of a particular type of culture.

Furthermore, we could raise questions on what to deduct from the fact that white males can be considered dominant in the United States and on the other hand it could be argued that the United States exercise major influence on global cultural products. (Schiller, 1991)

Samovar and Porter expand that

“[a]ll cultures are marked by a dominant group that greatly influences perceptions, communication patterns, beliefs, and values. Regardless of the source of power, certain people within every culture have a disproportionate amount of influence, and that influence gets translated into how people behave.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 12)

Co-cultures, on the contrary, are “those groups within a society that share many common cultural attributes – world views, beliefs, values, commonality of language, nonverbal behaviours, and identity – yet do not share power with the dominant culture.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 14) Therefore, members of these groups frequently express demands for recognition and equality. Examples of co-cultures according to Samovar and Porter include women, gays and lesbians, the deaf, the incarcerated, gangs, the homeless, prostitutes, the disabled, and the elderly. Anyhow, many members of these groups do not subscribe to all of the mainstream beliefs, values, and attitudes shared by the dominant culture. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 16.)

### 3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

As we have seen, culture affects communication in subtle and profound ways, with each cultural world operating according to its own internal dynamics and principles.

#### A DEFINITION OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

We can define intercultural communication in a general sense as occurring when “a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture” and, more precisely, as “communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are *distinct enough to alter the communication event.*” (Samovar and Porter, 2001. Emphasis mine)

In *Understanding Cultural Differences* Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall highlight that although culture is experienced individually it is in fact a shared system for collective behaviour.

“Members of a common culture not only share information, they share methods of coding, storing and retrieving that information. These methods vary from culture to culture. Knowing what kind of information people from other cultures require is one key to effective international communication.”  
(Hall, 1990. Emphasis mine)

For designers involved in an intercultural project this poses of course one of the main challenges – which can nevertheless be overcome with motivation, knowledge and mutual respect.

Presenting definitions and characteristics of culture, communication and intercultural communication as put forward by Samovar and Porter, as well as considering culture as tacit knowledge and notions of dominant and co-cultures we have now outlined the main concepts we are exploring from various aspects throughout this work before diving deeper.

## C. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN PERCEPTION: DEEP STRUCTURES OF CULTURE

*“Go deep. The deeper you go the more likely you will discover something of value.”*

BRUCE MAU, “An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth.”<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to understand the deep structures of culture and how they shape their individual members let us now take a look at the cultural diversity in perception, beliefs, attitudes, values, and cultural patterns. These explorations are significant in giving us insights on the basic ways in which we are shaped by culture and how this determines our view of reality. This knowledge not only allows us to conduct more effective and informed project-specific research but can generally take us further in the long term: Gaining knowledge and a deeper understanding of the complexity of cultural patterns is, as this work proposes, more significant and rewarding for intercultural design than quick and superficial “design rules”.

### 1. PERCEPTION AND CULTURE

In this sense, let us begin with exploring how culture shapes our perception of the world. As we will see, there are direct links among culture, perception, and behaviour, as culture has a strong influence on our subjective reality.

“Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensory data in a way that enables us to make sense of our world.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 53)  
Perception is an external process whereby people convert the physical energy of the world outside of them into meaningful internal experiences. *By exposing a large group of people to similar experiences culture generates similar meanings and similar behaviours.* Especially two factors create tight links between our cultural background and our perception of the world: Firstly, *perception is selective*, what our senses allow in is partly determined by culture. Secondly, *our perceptual patterns are learned* and,

therefore, culturally determined. “We learn to see the world in a certain way based on our cultural background.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 54)

Subsequently, perceptions are stored within each human being in the form of beliefs, attitudes, values, and cultural patterns.

## 2. BELIEF-, ATTITUDE- AND VALUE SYSTEMS

Belief systems are significant to intercultural communication, as they are *at the core of our thoughts and reflected in our actions*. “Beliefs serve as the storage system for the content of our past experiences, including thoughts, memories, and interpretations of events. Beliefs are shaped by the individual’s culture.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 54.)

An attitude is a “combination of beliefs about a subject, feelings toward it, and any predisposition to act toward it.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 56.) Attitudes have to be learned, with culture often being the source of this “learning”, and attitudes eventually get put into action.

Values are “a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 56.) Belief and attitude systems form the basis of our values.

“Values are *shared ideas* about what is true, right, and beautiful that underlie cultural patterns and guide society in response to the physical and social environment.” Thus, “a value system represents what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden. It is not a report of actual conduct but is the *system of criteria* by which conduct is judged and sanctions applied.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 56. Emphasis mine.)

We can distinguish individual and cultural values. Cultural values tend to be broad-based, enduring and relatively stable and are transmitted by a variety of sources, including family, media, school, church and state. They are generally *normative* and *evaluative* in that they inform a member of a culture what is good and bad, right and

wrong. They define what is worthwhile to die for, what is worth protecting, what frightens people, and what are proper subjects to study and which deserve ridicule. Guiding both perception and communication cultural values are consequently *translated into action* – and can therefore give insights for understanding other's and our own behaviour.

### 3. CULTURAL PATTERNS

People and cultures are extremely complex and consist of *numerous interrelated cultural orientations* besides beliefs, attitudes, and values. According to Samovar and Porter, the term “cultural patterns” refers to “both the conditions that contribute to the way in which a people perceive and think about the world, and the manner in which they live in that world.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 58.) Cultural patterns are systematic and repetitive, widely shared by most members of the culture, influencing the behaviour of people within that culture. The following aspects are useful to consider in studying cultural patterns (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 58.):

- a. *We are more than our culture.* The value of the culture may not be the value of all individuals within the culture.
- b. *Cultural patterns are points on a continuum.* People everywhere possess the same values to different degrees.
- c. *Cultural patterns are interrelated.* They are interrelated with a host of other values and do not operate in isolation.
- d. *Heterogeneity influences cultural patterns.* Attempting to delineate a national culture or typical cultural patterns for any culture is extremely hazardous because of the heterogeneity of many societies. Hence, common cultural patterns are generally applicable only for the dominant culture in each country. Furthermore, we need to take into account the increased cultural permeation which characterizes cultures today and therefore increases complexity and manifoldness of cultural patterns (as related to our discussions in chapter one).
- e. *There are numerous cultural patterns in each culture.*

- f. *Cultural patterns change.* However, as Samovar and Porter argue even though the nature of culture and value systems is dynamic, the deep structure of a culture resists change.
- g. *Cultural patterns are often contradictory.*

Giving an example, the following are dominant cultural patterns in the United States, according to Samovar and Porter: Individualism – Equality – Materialism – Science and Technology – Progress and Change – Work and Leisure – Competition

We have now outlined cultural influences determining our perception and interpretation of reality which is manifested in cultural diversity of belief-, attitude- and value systems as well as cultural patterns. According to Samovar and Porter I term these the deep structures of culture which can be seen as motivations of actual behaviour and determinants of how meaning is produced. Gaining an understanding of those can naturally provide invaluable insights for responding to an intercultural design problem with an appropriate solution.

## D. STUDIES OF DIVERSE CULTURAL PATTERNS

Within this section we will now outline specific aspects of diversity in cultural patterns, introducing the renowned work of Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede as well as the findings of American anthropologists Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall. Both studies have been conducted already in the 1980s, but their findings can nevertheless provide relevant information to studies in this field up to today, providing a useful framework and revealing basic tendencies of diversity in cultural patterns. Familiarizing ourselves and applying these or similar studies will be helpful in conducting more directed research as well as for formulating culturally sensitive design solutions.

### 1. HOFSTEDE'S VALUE DIMENSIONS

Geert Hofstede's work was one of the earliest attempts to use extensive statistical data to examine cultural values surveying over a hundred thousand workers in

multinational organizations in forty countries during the 1980s. In his analysis, Hofstede identified four value dimensions to have significant impact on behaviour in all cultures, and assigned a rank between one and forty for each country in every category, depending on how it compared to the other countries. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 56) Hofstede's value dimensions include Individualism–Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance and Masculinity–Femininity.<sup>2</sup>

#### a. INDIVIDUALISM–COLLECTIVISM

This dimension compares “self-orientation versus collective orientation” as “one of the basic pattern variables that determine human action.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001)

##### INDIVIDUALISM

In cultures characterized by individualism the individual is the single most important unit in any social setting, and the uniqueness of each individual is of paramount value. Independence rather than dependence is stressed and individual achievement is rewarded. Accordingly, individualism manifests itself in personal initiative, independence, individual expression, privacy, and individual responsibility. Individual achievement, sovereignty and freedom are the virtues most glorified.

In cultures tending towards individualism, competition rather than cooperation is encouraged, personal goals take precedence over group goals, people tend not to be emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions; and every individual has the right to her/his private property, thoughts, and opinions. According to Hofstede's findings, the United States, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand are examples of cultures tending towards individualism.

##### COLLECTIVISM

Collectivism, on the other hand, is characterized by a rigid social framework that distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups. People count on their in-group (relatives, clans, organizations) to look after them, and in exchange for that they believe they owe absolute loyalty to the group. (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 66.)

Collectivism means greater emphasis on the views, needs, and goals of the in-group rather than oneself, social norms and duty defined by the in-group rather than

behaviour to get pleasure, beliefs shared with the in-group rather than beliefs that distinguish oneself from the in-group, as well as great readiness to cooperate with in-group members. A we consciousness prevails: Identity is based on the social system and the culture emphasizes belonging to organizations. The individual is emotionally dependent on organizations and institutions and trust group decisions even at the expense of individual rights.

In collective societies such as those in Venezuela, Colombia, Pakistan, Peru, Taiwan, Thailand and Singapore, people are born into extended families or clans that support and protect them in exchange for their loyalty. Also China and most African societies are characterized by collectivism; altogether, as estimated in 1990, about 70% of the world's population live in collective cultures.

#### b. UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

As the term is used by Hofstede, uncertainty avoidance “defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour and a belief in absolute truths.” (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 68.)

#### HIGH UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

High-uncertainty-avoidance cultures try to avoid ambiguity by providing stability for their members, establishing more formal rules, not tolerating deviant ideas and behaviours, seeking consensus, and believing in absolute truths and expertise. They are also characterized by a higher level of anxiety and stress: People think of the uncertainty inherent in life as a continuous hazard to be avoided. There is a strong need for written rules, planning, regulations, rituals, and ceremonies, which add structure to life. Nations with a strong uncertainty-avoidance tendency in Hofstede's study are Greece, Portugal, Belgium, Japan, Yugoslavia, Chile, Peru and France.

#### LOW UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

At the other end of the scale countries like Singapore, Denmark, Sweden, Hong Kong, Ireland, Great Britain, India, the Philippines and the United States, turned out to have a low-uncertainty avoidance need. They more easily accept the uncertainty inherent



in life and are not as threatened by deviant people and ideas, tolerating the unusual. They prize initiative, dislike the structure associated with hierarchy, are more flexible and willing to take risks, think that there should be as few rules as possible, and depend not so much on experts as on themselves, and common sense. As a whole, members of low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures are less tense and more relaxed.

Uncertainty avoidance could be valuable to consider for interactive systems as well as its effect on learning situations or usability testing.

### c. POWER DISTANCE

The premise of this dimension examines the distance between power and the members of a particular culture and deals with the extent to which a society prefers that power in relationships, institutions, and organizations is distributed unequally. According to Hofstede, in some cultures, those who hold power and those who are affected by power are far apart in many ways, while in other cultures, they are significantly closer.

#### LARGE POWER DISTANCE

People in large-power-distance countries such as the Philippines, Mexico, Venezuela, India, Yugoslavia, Singapore, Brazil and Hong Kong believe that power and authority are facts of life. Both consciously and unconsciously, these cultures teach their members that people are not equal in this world and that everybody has a rightful place, which is clearly marked by countless vertical arrangements. Social hierarchy is prevalent and institutionalizes inequality.

In the organizations within large-power-distance cultures you find a greater *centralization of power*, great importance placed on status and rank, a larger proportion of supervisory personnel, and the bypassing of subordinates in the decision-making process.

#### SMALL POWER DISTANCE

Small-power-distance countries hold that inequality in society should be minimized, as indicated by Hofstede's study. People in these cultures believe that they are close to power and should have access to that power. Subordinates consider superiors to

be the same kind of people as they are, and superiors perceive their subordinates the same way. People in power, be they supervisors or government officials, often interact with their constituents and try to look less powerful than they really are. Examples in the study are Israel, Denmark, New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Austria and Switzerland.

#### d. MASCULINITY-FEMININITY

##### MASCULINITY

Hofstede uses the words masculinity and femininity to refer to the degree to which masculine or feminine traits are valued and revealed. Masculinity is the extent to which the dominant values in a society are male oriented. These cultures are associated with such behaviors as ambition, differentiated sex roles, achievement, the acquisition of money, and signs of manliness. Japan, Austria, Venezuela, Italy, Switzerland, Mexico, Ireland, Great Britain and Germany are among countries that tend toward a masculine world view. In a masculine society, men are taught to be domineering, ambitious, and assertive.

##### FEMININITY

Cultures that value femininity as a trait stress caring and nurturing behaviors. A feminine world view maintains that men need not be assertive and that they can assume nurturing roles, it also promotes sexual equality and holds that people and the environment are important. Gender roles in feminine societies are more fluid than in masculine societies.

Nations such as Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, Yugoslavia, Finland, Chile, Portugal and Thailand tend towards a feminine world-view.

#### e. REVIEWING HOFSTEDÉ'S WORK

The validity of Hofstede's findings has been criticized for several reasons: Firstly most of his findings are work-related, as he has conducted his research among employees of multinational organizations, and it remains questionable indeed in how far the outcome can be generalized to the culture as a whole, as his research only included

members of a very specific culture of use. Furthermore, many important countries and cultures were not included in Hofstede's research – no Arab and African countries were originally part of the study.

It has also been argued that the research has been conducted several decades ago and the pertinence of its findings cannot be accepted as granted. This point needs to be considered, as we have observed in chapter one that many societies have gone through major transformations within this time. However, as proposed by Samovar and Porter, it could also be argued that although cultures change, their deep structures are resistant to change.

In summary, Hofstede's value dimensions could be regarded as a helpful framework to be applied for research in intercultural design, as it allows consideration of specific cultural dimensions. Anyhow, there is a tendency to overgeneralize and the study should therefore be applied in critical reflection.

Having presented Hofstede's model of culture we can gain insights on specific aspects of differences in cultural patterns. Furthermore, Hofstede's work is widely referred to in literature on international interface design and it is therefore useful to familiarize ourselves with his work at this point.

## 2. HALL'S UNDERLYING STRUCTURES OF CULTURE

Another study on the deep structures of culture as related to intercultural communication, has been introduced by Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall in *Understanding Cultural Differences*, with their work concentrating on revealing non-verbal communication patterns, including the culturally diverse understanding of time and space. Interestingly, they point out that “[t]he essence of effective cross-cultural communication has more to do with releasing the right responses than with sending the “right” messages.” (Hall, 1990) In this sense, let us take a look at the underlying structures of culture proposed by the Halls striving to achieve this aim of being able to release the right responses in our intercultural communications.

a. FAST AND SLOW MESSAGES: FINDING THE APPROPRIATE SPEED

As proposed by the Halls, we can distinguish fast messages, such as a headline or a cartoon, and slow messages, like books or art, which require a slower pace to extract their meaning. While the content of a message sent with inappropriate speed may be understandable, it won't be received by someone accustomed to or expecting a different speed. Consider the following examples of fast and slow messages:

EXAMPLES OF FAST AND SLOW MESSAGES

*Fast Messages*

Prose  
Headlines  
Propaganda  
Cartoons  
TV commercials  
Television  
Easy familiarity  
Manners

*Slow Messages*

Poetry  
Books  
Art  
Etchings  
TV documentary  
Print  
Deep relationships  
Culture

In essence a person is a slow message: it takes time to get to know someone well. The message is, of course, slower in some cultures than in others. The problem is that few people are aware that information can be sent at different speeds. In intercultural communications the art lies in finding the appropriate speed.

b. HIGH AND LOW CONTEXT: HOW MUCH INFORMATION IS ENOUGH?

Context is the information surrounding an event and is therefore tightly linked with the meaning of that event. *The elements that combine to produce a given meaning consist of the event itself as well as its context* – depending in different proportions on the culture. The Halls propose that the cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context.

“A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which *most* of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation.” (Hall, 1990: 6)

High-context cultures have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues, and clients and are involved in close personal relationships; as a result, for most normal transactions in daily life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information. This is because they keep themselves informed about everything having to do with the people who are important in their lives. Cultures with high context include, according to the Halls, Japanese, Arabs, and Mediterranean peoples.

Low-context people, on the other hand, compartmentalize their personal relationships, their work, and many aspects of day-to-day life and consequently, need detailed background information each time they interact with others. Examples of this orientation are found in the cultural patterns of Americans, Germans, Swiss, Scandinavians and other northern Europeans.

“High-context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low-context people insist on giving them information they don’t need. Conversely, low-context people are at loss when high-context people do not provide *enough* information. One of the great communications challenges in life is to find the appropriate level of contexting needed in each situation.”  
(Hall, 1990: 9)

This power of context will continue to be emphasized in our discussions of intercultural design and cross-cultural representation. *In determining the level and form of the context, design has a major impact on the actual meaning produced from specific information.*

### c. TIME AS COMMUNICATION

#### MONOCHRONIC AND POLYCHRONIC TIME

Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall distinguish two basic patterns in temporal perception of cultures, referring to monochronic time – “paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time” – as opposed to polychronic time – “being involved with many things at once.” (Hall, 1990: 13)

In monochronic cultures, time is experienced and used in a linear way – comparable to a road extending from the past into the future. Monochronic time is divided quite naturally into segments; it is scheduled and compartmentalized, making it possible for a person to concentrate on one thing at a time. This is the prevalent time system employed for example in the United States, Switzerland, Germany and Scandinavia and appears to be natural and logical in these cultures – despite the fact that it is *learned*.

Polychronic time systems, on the other hand, are characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things and a great involvement with people. There is more emphasis on completing human transactions than on holding to schedules. Two polychronic Latin Americans, for example, who are conversing on a street corner would likely opt to be late for their next appointment rather than abruptly terminate the conversation before its natural conclusion. Some polychronic people (such as Latin Americans and Arabs) give precedence of their large circle of family members over any business obligation, they have many close friends and good clients with whom they spend a great deal of time. Additionally, polychronic people live in a sea of information, as they feel they must be up to the minute about everything and everybody, be it business or personal. Polychronic time is experienced as much less tangible than monochronic time and can better be compared to a single point than to a road.

While the generalizations listed below do not apply equally to all cultures, they will help convey a pattern (Hall, 1990):

#### MONOCHRONIC PEOPLE

Do one thing at a time

Concentrate on the job

Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously

Are low-context and need information

Are committed to the job

Adhere religiously to plans

Are concerned about not disturbing others; Follow rules of privacy and consideration

Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend

Emphasize promptness

Are accustomed to short-term relationships

#### POLYCHRONIC PEOPLE

Do many things at once

Are highly distractible and subject to interruptions

Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible

Are high-context and already have information

Are committed to people and human relationships

Change plans often and easily

Are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends) than with privacy

Borrow and lend things often and easily

Base promptness on the relationship

Have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

Understanding these interaction patterns can be helpful in order to develop appropriate design solutions.

#### PAST- AND FUTURE-ORIENTED COUNTRIES

Furthermore, it is important to know which segments of the time frame are emphasized. Cultures in countries as Iran, India, and the Far East, for example, are past-oriented. Others, such as that of the urban United States, are oriented to the present and short-term future, and still others, such as those of Latin America, are both past- and present-oriented. (Hall, 1990: 17)

As the Halls' underlying structures reveal, cultural patterns can subtly but profoundly influence the ways we communicate. Not-so-obvious dimensions like the speed, context or timing of our messages point to the complexity of communication actions and meaning production across cultures. Furthermore, it can remind designers of the significance of considering and sensitively controlling the context of the communication event as it forms *part of the message*. Although the Halls' research was – similar as Hofstede's – conducted in a business context and nearly two decades ago, their framework can be regarded useful in identifying specific aspects of difference in cultural patterns.

We have now been introduced to two examples of cultural models outlining cultural patterns according to the studies conducted by Hofstede and the Halls. Familiarizing ourselves with such models can provide important insights and they are widely applied in research on intercultural interface design as well as usability testing.

## E. TOWARDS SUCCESSFUL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

“You cannot *not* communicate.”

PAUL WATZLAWICK

Paul Watzlawick's famous axiom could not have more relevance than in intercultural design. As we have seen, the deep structures of culture have profound impacts on our communication behaviour, the ways we deal with information and interact with others. Being aware of the complexity and interrelatedness of these cultural patterns we now have a necessary basis to concentrate on a very specific form of intercultural communication: Intercultural design.

At this stage I would like to invite you to take a moment to identify your own culture or co-culture(s). Secondly, consider how this cultural background shapes your position in an intercultural encounter. And finally: As a designer, how does it influence your design process, your creative choices and your sense of aesthetics? – Taking a moment



to contemplate on this, usually taken-for-granted starting point will help us to make the first of what I propose as two important steps towards successful intercultural communication:

1. *Situating Oneself Reflexively,*
2. *Interacting Ethically.*

In an interrelated world the awareness of one's own position becomes increasingly significant. Situating oneself reflexively and understanding our position and perspective in an intercultural encounter is essential for reducing bias, avoiding naivety and opening up for attempts of genuine understanding. Questions of relevance in this context are: *How do we know what we know?* And furthermore: *How do we act upon it with a sense of morality?*

Interacting ethically is concerned with our behaviour and choices significant in an everyday practice of intercultural communication. As related to our discussions within the first chapter, as designers we are important stakeholders who need to acknowledge and increase our awareness of the ethical dimensions of the Information Society. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states in this context that "the process of globalization, facilitated by the rapid development of new information and communication technologies, though representing a challenge for cultural diversity, creates the conditions for renewed dialogue among cultures and civilizations." As designers engaging within the realm of digital media we can therefore contribute to shaping a fruitful environment for such a dialogue to take place, creating intercultural design solutions with a sense of responsibility and respect for cultural diversity.

Within this chapter we have defined culture and communication and some of their characteristics in order to clarify concepts as used in this work, as well as outlined cultural diversity in perception, as expressed in belief-, attitude- and value systems, and cultural patterns. Moreover, two examples of cultural models have been presented as proposed by the studies of cultural patterns by Geert Hofstede and Mildred Reed and Edward T. Hall. This basic information might be useful for

designers in creating a deeper level of understanding regarding design across cultures, especially considering that knowledge of such theoretical framework cannot be assumed as it is generally not included in design education. The discussions within this chapter have furthermore helped to highlight the complexity of issues involved in intercultural communication.

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO:

<sup>1</sup> MAU, BRUCE. *Life Style*. London: Phaidon, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Later also “Long-term Orientation” was added as fifth dimension to the original study.

### III. INTERCULTURAL DESIGN

Within the following chapter let us now focus our view on a very specific case of intercultural communication and interaction: The context in which interculturality and the field of design overlap. My central research question which I aim to explore further within this thesis is: *Which are issues designers ought to consider in designing across cultures?*

Consequently, the following chapter aims to explore and draw our attention to some significant issues related to intercultural design. It will introduce a variety of topics relating to intercultural design practice, including international pictorial systems, design issues for culturally diverse interfaces as well as a critical examination of the practice of cross-cultural representation and its ethical implications. Although my aim is to present an insightful overview on relevant issues in intercultural design, I would like to remind the reader that this selection is obviously not exhaustive and developed within the scope of this thesis. This discussion aims to introduce some related issues which might provide insights as well for the concept design as for the actual design development of intercultural projects. Accordingly, some parts of this chapter, like the presentation of international pictorial systems, are more oriented towards the actual design practice, while other parts, like the discussion of cross-cultural representation, aim to give the reader a critical perspective on especially sensitive issues in intercultural design in order to create informed and responsible design concepts.

In summary, the main purpose of this chapter is to create awareness of the, within our field, all-encompassing qualities of this intersection of culture and design and its complex and sensitive interrelations with the socio-cultural context it is embedded in. Introducing these issues I hope to provide starting points and inspiration for other designers to continue with more specific research in relation to actual projects they are involved in.

## A. THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

“Every designer operates in a cultural framework. We are all influenced by the place we come from, the society we live in, the people, the artefacts, the music that surround us.”

GARRY EMERY, “Culture In Design”

Our following discussion therefore aims to establish a self-reflexive stance appealing to designers to identify her/his own role as well as to understand the significance of her/his background and individual choices within the intercultural design process. In this sense, let us start this examination of intercultural design with the obvious observation that all design is culturally based. Design is a *culturally determined product* which is embedded in a particular cultural context. As we have seen in the last chapter, each culture defines how ideas are expressed and which values are given prominence. As designers we need to understand this determining connection between culture and design, as well as achieve an awareness of how our specific cultural background accordingly shapes our professional work. Commencing this discussion let us therefore firstly reflect on our own role as designers in the intercultural design process, and attempt to recognize our individual position within this context.

### 1. DESIGN SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT WORK FOR YOUR OWN CULTURE.

During a workshop I was participating in in February 2001 as part of my studies for the Master of New Media, our teachers Maari Fabritius and Samu Mielonen had prepared a special task for us. In an exercise on intercultural design we were supposed to create an interface design which would not be applicable to *our own culture* – because it would be culturally offensive or simply subject to misinterpretation.

Among the participants, all of us found ourselves struggling with this task. – Though using them in our daily practice we had never reflected on the silent visual conventions of our culture before, and now we realized how hard it was to design something that actually would *not* work for our own culture. This was a very effective exercise as it clearly confronted us with the massive invisible dimensions of our cultural bias. I realized then that even drawing the first sketch, or doing the first conceptual brainstorming, our design process is based on a number of unquestioned assumptions which are generally taken for granted. These assumptions are what we have been taught by our culture all our lives – but of course when applied to another cultural system, they do not necessarily have the same meaning, or indeed any meaning at all.

This exercise asked us now to identify these visual conventions and in consequence to break them. As we experienced, this is quite a challenge indeed, but gives invaluable insights for intercultural design. In order to create successful intercultural design solutions we first of all have to distance ourselves from and *question everything we know* and start from scratch. This is naturally only possible to a certain extent, but knowledge of intercultural design will help us on the way. Nevertheless, in the end, collaborating with, or at least receiving feedback from a member of the specific target-culture at an early stage in the design process, is essential.

The realizations I made that day captured my attention for the first time on the issues related to intercultural design. The richness and complexity of the subject fascinated me and, as you can see, I remained it since then. What I also learned that day was how ignorant we are towards cultural issues until we for the first time consciously focus our attention on them and achieve an awareness of their all-encompassing and dynamic qualities. Therefore, one purpose of this thesis is to create such awareness also among other designers in the visual community, and especially those working within the global realm of the World Wide Web.

## 2. A QUESTION OF ATTITUDE

“Lessons learned:

1. Use your eyes and ears more than your mouth.
2. Pretend you know nothing then you might learn something.”

TIBOR KALMAN on *Colors* magazine

Tibor Kalman’s statement on lessons the team learned in creating *Colors*, a magazine presenting social issues and promoting cultural diversity to a world-wide audience, brings it to the point.

As it could be argued, intercultural design is first of all a question of *attitude*. An appropriate attitude is, from my perspective, essentially the foundation which will decide the success of any form of intercultural communication. – Everything else will follow. As an appropriate attitude I would qualify the following frame of mind: A stance of *openness* and curiosity for what other cultures have to offer – *respect* for the value of different ways of seeing and interacting with this world – *responsibility* for one’s actions on the threshold between cultures and the consequences these will have on people – and last but not least, what I also read out of Kalman’s statement, a sense of *humbleness* in encountering other cultures.

Even though this is what our culture aims to make us believe, *there is no way of handling the experience as a human being or interacting with this world which is inherently “right” or in any sense more valid than any other*. We need to understand that the world we are living in and our experience of daily existence is in fact endlessly complex and chaotic. As we have seen in chapter two, all cultures are simply doing their best in order to come to terms with this situation giving a certain form to it – in order to provide us with a structure that will enable each individual to handle the challenges of daily life more efficiently. While, the problems are always the same, the solutions differ. Therefore, when it comes to intercultural communication I consider it substantial that we assume a mind-frame of modesty and genuinely ask ourselves: *Who am I to tell you how to live your life?*

### 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

Apart from an appropriate attitude, acknowledging the importance of in-depth cultural research could be considered the second determining factor for creating successful intercultural design solutions. Discussing a variety of issues that might be of relevance, this work hopes to *provide designers with a foundation* and suggests that only by adding an extra dimension of research and analysis to the usual creative process designers will be able to operate informed and successfully beyond their own cultural environment.

While the importance of research might seem obvious to some, this basic consideration and study of one's target audience can in no way be taken for granted, as the following examples of past faux-pas in cross-cultural design amusingly illustrate: Mitsubishi called their new four-wheel drive vehicle "Pajero" until they discovered that the word means "masturbator" in Spanish. Another automobile export fiasco happened to an American company with an interesting strategy for selling in Japan: The steering wheel was on the wrong side. The outside mirrors could not fold up close to the car, making it impossible for cars to squeeze down narrow streets and into little garages. Seat sizes and adjustments did not match the Japanese build so that people could hardly see over the dashboard. Engines were not designed to run on Japan's lower octane fuel and performed poorly. The letters *R*, *D* and *L* had no meaning for people who only read Japanese. Even the owner's manual was in English. (Fernandes, 1995)

These and many similar examples give evidence of how international corporations are capable of spending big budgets on launching their products in foreign markets, initializing major marketing campaigns to promote their brand image and still manage to simply neglect the very basics of familiarizing oneself with the culture of their audience. From this perspective it is clear that achieving expertise in the realm of intercultural design should also be a *major business agenda*. Approaching one's audience with knowledge and the deserved respect obviously also pays off. Royal Philips Electronics included even a section on cultural diversity on their website, declaring their new policy (as the members of the board are currently all white males):

“Diversity is all about creating a company culture in which individuals of all races, genders, backgrounds and sexual orientations are equally able to rise through the ranks to key executive and management positions. More and more multinationals are beginning to implement diversity policies – but, apart from being an ideologically sound argument, is diversity good for business? [...]

*Companies that actively promote minorities have a greater understanding of the needs and preferences of these groups and are more likely to benefit from business opportunities in these market segments. And there’s big money to be made. Minorities in the US, for example, have a buying power of US\$ 1.1 trillion, roughly equivalent to the world’s seventh largest GDP. By 2010 it’s estimated that African-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities in the US will outnumber white Americans. In the UK, minority communities have an annual disposable income of around EUR 15 billion. And that’s not mentioning the purchasing power of emerging markets [...].”<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine.)*

Consequently, let us consider the wise and at the same time very practical attitude of renowned Australian graphic designer Garry Emery, whose studio Garry Emery Design has been involved in numerous international projects and delivered outstanding examples of culturally informed and sensitive design. In the following statements from an insightful lecture on “Culture In Design” at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology he emphasises the importance of a “lengthy initial process of research and analysis” within his design practice.

“[...] I must be able to understand how to work effectively in different cultures. But I am just a designer and not a scholar. I cannot become an expert in, for example, Islamic culture or Chinese culture. Yet when working in Hong Kong or Kuala Lumpur or Singapore I need to be sensitive to the different cultural values and subtleties that I will never be able to fully understand. My work will inevitably interpret these different cultures through my own Australian filter. I run the risk of not always getting things right. But I believe that it is possible for a designer from outside to come with an open mind and a conscientious methodology and produce valid design outcomes for a culture that is not their own – and perhaps also provide the fresh insight that only outsiders are sometimes capable of.” (Emery, 2002)



Accordingly, he explains his studio's strategy when involved in intercultural projects:

“[When] designing for another culture I commence with a process of detailed cultural research and analysis and then make interpretations that will lead towards a design strategy. First we amass data of all kinds and pass it through a series of functional and cultural filters to sort and clarify our observations which we hope will lead eventually to a culturally appropriate design solution.”  
(Emery, 2002)

These research outcomes can then be fruitfully integrated into a culturally specific design development which takes account of local traditions, as we will later see in the case study of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, which Emery's studio was commissioned for.

Summarizing these considerations, the significance of as well project- as audience-specific research in intercultural design projects cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, we also need to make every effort to test our design as early and often as possible with the audience of our target culture. (Nielsen, 1996) Even better of course, if we have any possibility, is to arrange a collaboration with a designer who is herself a member of the culture the design is targeted at. These two steps if incorporated can immensely benefit the quality of a given project.

During this section I have now described the origin of my personal interest in the subject of intercultural design and furthermore proposed two factors to be relevant concerning the designer's role in the intercultural design process: Firstly, the designer's attitude towards intercultural encounters, and secondly the importance of extensive research, especially during the initial stages of the design process in intercultural projects. These discussions have been useful in raising our awareness of the significant role the designer plays within the process, making numerous choices of impact. Moreover it has been outlined that a considered and well-situated starting position will help the project to move into the right direction.

## B. INTERNATIONAL VISUAL LANGUAGE: SIGN SYSTEMS

Let us continue at this point with exploring established practices of international visual communication which can give insights for intercultural interface design in new media. To begin with it will be necessary to question wide-spread assumptions of the universal applicability of visual design as an “international language” and reconsider their validity. Additionally, making ourselves familiar with international conventions for sign systems as well as with examples of culturally diverse applications can prove useful for designing intercultural interfaces.

### 1. IS IT POSSIBLE TO CREATE A UNIVERSAL VISUAL LANGUAGE?

“There is a universal language, understood by everybody, but already forgotten. I am in search of that universal language, among other things. That’s why I’m here. I have to find a man who knows that universal language. An alchemist.”

PAULO COELHO, *The Alchemist* <sup>2</sup>

The question if visual communication can establish a universal language which is able to transcend cultural boundaries is significant for a study of intercultural design. Attempting to answer it, however, would exceed the scope of this thesis – considering the complexity of visual language itself as well as the of the concept of “universality”.

Posing it even though is very relevant in our context – according to the fact that numerous visual designers take its answer for granted, without even considering the question. It has been a wide-spread myth in visual design that graphic communication is an international language which is able to transcend cultural boundaries. This position developed with the ideas of modernism which arose in Europe in the late 19th century and had significant impact on the art produced in the early 20th century. Modernism claimed that going deep enough it is possible to achieve universal

commonality through a reduced vocabulary of elementary shapes and colours and in this sense produced a style based on a strict unadorned aesthetic and rational principles. The apotheosis of this way of thinking are Mies van der Rohe's modern buildings, which incorporate the elegance of minimalism where nothing hints of tradition. It was the time of the Bauhaus and its proclamation of an "international style" connected to the new possibilities of industrial development. This modern concept of universality persisted for long after and its ideas can be recognized in graphic communication for example in the 1960s when Swiss designer Adrian Frutiger created a typeface with the name "Univers".

Post-modernism in turn questioned the existence of such universality, which presupposes that the codes used for communicating are shared by everybody regardless of culture and independent of cultural perception. In any case, the modernist idea of graphic communication operating on a universal level has been persistent within the visual design community and, from my experience, numerous graphic designers base their work on the assumption that they are speaking an international language until today. So why then is it important for designers to understand the significance of cultural diversity?

According to this, I would like to invite you now to reconsider the question of universality at this point: Do you agree that contemporary visual design in the form it is today can be regarded as a universal language of form which is able to communicate regardless of culture? In this sense, do you believe that a piece of graphic communication would be understood in the same way by an audience in New Zealand, Peru, Uganda, Sweden, Ukraine, and Indonesia?

Personally I consider this assumption simply absurd, taking into account the highly diverse context of these nations. Nevertheless, this very assumption has been prevalent in the field of design and is still widely taken for granted until this day.

Observing the current situation, we can realize that the majority of visual design which has exposure within the international design scene originates from either the United States, Europe or Japan – while other parts of the world appear to have partly adopted this "international" visual vocabulary in addition to the graphic language that

has its roots in their specific culture. Thus, I would like to suggest that we need to distinguish between a certain form of visual vocabulary which has clear origins in the so-called “First World” but is *learned* by other cultures being exposed to it – and on the other hand the concept of *universality*.

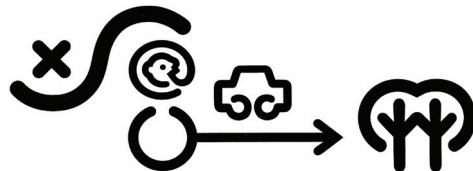
Similarly this is the case with the English language: while it has been adopted as a major language of international communication and many people all over the world have learned it – as a result of massive cultural flows originating from English-speaking countries – we can obviously not assume that it is therefore universal. From my perspective there is a need to make a clear distinction between these two notions within design.

## 2. SPEAKING WITHOUT TALKING

This is not to say that it is generally not possible to create such a universal visual vocabulary, even though it could be considered quite a challenge. Maybe we will at some point in the future be able to communicate through some kind of visual Esperanto – in a syntactic as well as semantic sense of the term “visual language.” Interesting efforts have already been made in this direction and even towards creating a purely visual semantic system which allows to communicate across language boundaries and contributes towards a democratisation of information, being available to those without access to formal education.

*The Elephant’s Memory*, developed by Timothee Ingen–Housz, is such an attempt at a modern pictorial language – consisting of 150 combinable logograms which represent concepts as well as verbs and nouns. It is based on the idea that logograms can be combined with each other or even pictures and moving images, like in the example which signifies: “I will go to the forest by car.” The name reflects the aspiration that these symbols are so instantly memorable that, like the proverbial elephant, we will never forget them. According to Ingen–Housz the Elephant’s Memory “invites people from various cultural backgrounds to communicate and explore a new means of expression.” Furthermore, “[a]s the Internet turns into a global multi-lingual community, the project searches for new ways to bridge cultures, and builds a transitional space

between natural languages.”<sup>3</sup> The system has much to offer in terms of possible use in graphical interfaces and it will be interesting to follow its development in the future.



Sample sentence from “The Elephant’s Memory” by Timothee Ingen–Housz:

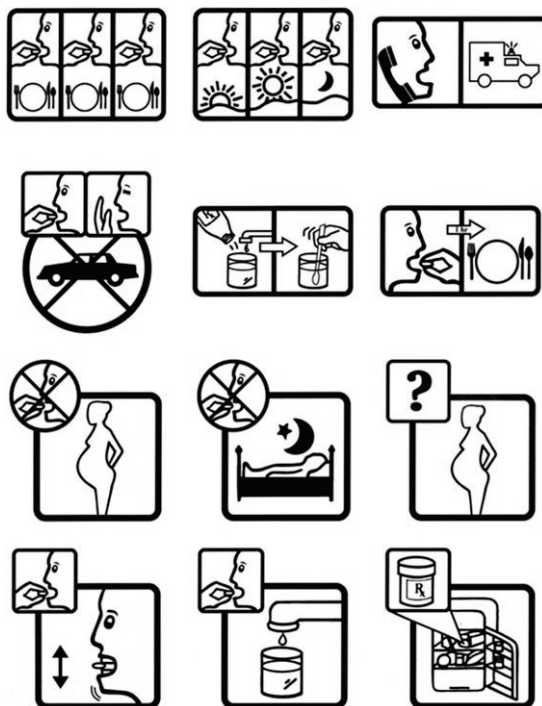
“I will go to the forest by car.” Source: Evamy, 2003.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION

ISO, the International Organization for Standardization, is a worldwide federation concerned with developing international standards. Within the context of international visual communication ISO has developed a common set of internationally accepted procedures and standards such as graphical symbols.

A graphical symbol is defined as: “a visually perceptible figure with a particular meaning used to *transmit information independently of language*.” (Perry, 2003) In an era of rapidly growing world trade and movements of people graphical symbols are increasingly used responding to the need to provide a language-independent means of communication. Graphical symbols may depict animals, people or objects and, depending on the intended use, may be designed to be understood intuitively or have no obvious visual connection with the function with which they are associated. Examples are graphical symbols used in the context of public information signs, and safety signs or on equipment and products.

The following pictograms are an example of language-independent communication developed for drug-packaging in order to facilitate international distribution and respond to risks in drug use for patients with low literacy. Issued by the US Pharmacopeia, they are freely available for drug companies to use and cover a multitude of medication scenarios. Some, however, may require explanation. (Evamy, 2003)



Drug packaging pictorial instructions and warnings.  
© 1997 USPC. Source: Evamy, 2003.

Such international standards ensure fluent transitions when crossing national borders and provide a valuable framework for international cooperation. On the roads, the 1949 *UN Convention on Road Signs and Signals* ensured that drivers all over the world are asked to abide by a common set of graphic devices whereby triangular signs indicate warnings, circular give orders and rectangular ones information. Although this may sound monolithic, the system does allow for considerable and interesting local variations. (Burgoyne, 2003)



Global “Men at work” signs. *Source: Evamy, 2003.*

When designing graphical symbols we need to be aware of cultural differences in the same way, as John Perry, Project Leader of ISO COPOLCO points out:

“There may be cultural differences – such as preferences or prohibitions – that need to be identified and taken into account when designing graphical symbols. For example, in some cultures, depictions of parts of the human body or particular images may not be acceptable, and some colours may have particular connotations in one culture and evoke different responses in another. In this context, it is important to ensure that a graphical symbol does not convey one meaning to one group and another meaning to a different group. These matters should be researched carefully and appropriate advice sought and acted upon.” (Perry, 2003)

In this sense let us now move on to discussing international applications of signage systems aimed to communicate effectively across cultures.

## 4. SIGNAGE SYSTEMS

### a. THE WORK OF OTTO NEURATH

That signage systems have become so embedded in our public conscience is due in no small part to Viennese philosopher and social scientist Otto Neurath. He and his colleagues created a set of pictographic characters as an alternative to written script which could be used to convey information about directions, events and objects but also about complex relationships. Neurath called the system he introduced in 1936 ISOTYPE, the International System Of Typographic Picture Education. (Lupton and Miller, 1996)

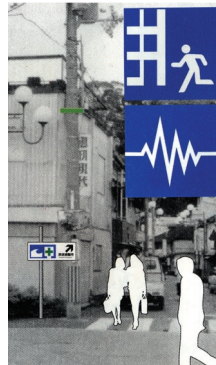
The stylistic principles of Neurath's Isotype remain the basis of international pictograms today: *reduction* and *consistency*. Many Isotype signs are flat shapes with little or no interior detail. When depth is expressed in Isotype, isometric drawings are used instead of traditional perspective. The reduction and consistency of international pictures heighten their alphabetic quality. Neurath's Isotype was an utopian effort to transcend the limitations of letters by exploiting the visual characteristics of typography. He conceived of it as clean, logical and free of redundancy and believed that Isotype could transcend national boundaries and unify global social life. In any case, the symbols of Isotype are neither universal, self-evident, nor purely informational – like linguistic signs, they *must be learned*; like other styles of drawing, they are *culturally specific*. The clean, geometric character of the signs is loaded with cultural associations – “public”, “neutral”, “modern.” (Lupton and Miller, 1996) Related to our prior discussion, it is clear that Neurath's work is deeply rooted in the ideas of modernism. Anyhow, with an understanding that such signage systems even in their high degree of abstraction are culturally determined products let us take a look at public information systems in different parts of the world.

### b. EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES

#### JAPAN

Japanese public information signage reflects a national love for traditional culture and courtesy.





Above: Tsunami warning sign system developed by GK Kyoto Inc and professor Haruo Hayashi of the Disaster Prevention Unit of Kyoto University  
Source: Evamy, 2003.

Right: Japanese public information sign system. Source: Evamy, 2003.

On Shikoten island a sophisticated Tsunami warning system has been developed by the Disaster Prevention Unit at Kyoto University, in order to inform visitors on the hazards and evacuation system.

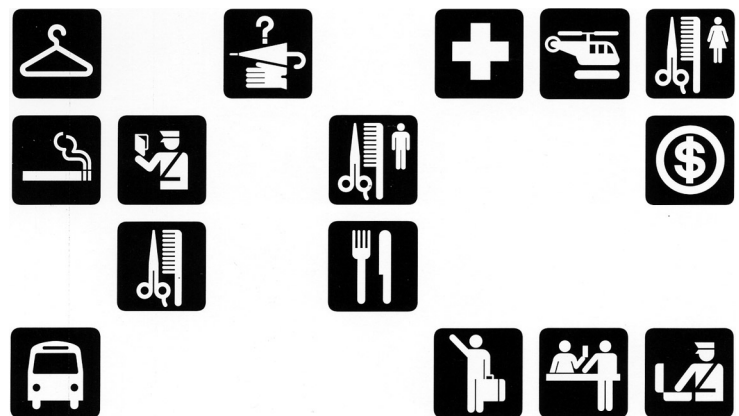
In the city of Fukuoka, a business centre, a beautiful information system has been developed for the local subway, featuring a pictogram as well as the written name of each station in order to aid international visitors. (Evamy, 2003)



Fukuoka subway line and icons. Source: Evamy, 2003.

## UNITED STATES

The symbol set developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation illustrates how the principles of consistency govern the stylistic uniformity of a public information system.



US Department of Transportation public information signs. *Source: Evamy, 2003.*

## INDIA

In India, where fourteen different languages are spoken and literacy is low, pictorial signs are an important aid for communication. This information system used in Indian hospitals needed to reflect the nature of Indian society with its traditional divisions between sexes, castes and religions. Thus there are separate signs for men's queues and ladies' queues, the standard male and female figures are featured in traditional dress including turbans and saris, and there are signs for cycle rickshaw parking. (Burgoyne, 2003)



These examples interestingly and beautifully reveal the impact of local culture on pictographic language. For digital designers they might additionally provide inspiration for the work on interface-icons, as screen-based media tend to rely on graphic symbols rather than written script.

Wrapping up this exploration of international signage systems let us look a little closer at one final example: The signage developed for the Kuala Lumpur City Centre in Malaysia by Garry Emery Design in what I regard as an exemplary case of intercultural design developed with great sensitivity to local sensibilities and based on extensive background research.

## MALAYSIA

### CASE STUDY: SIGNAGE SYSTEM FOR KUALA LUMPUR CITY CENTRE

The Melbourne-based studio Garry Emery Design was commissioned in 1996 to design the way-finding and signage systems for the Kuala Lumpur City Centre. The Kuala Lumpur City Centre was a major urban development, featuring the world's tallest building, the Twin-Petronas-Towers designed by American architect Cesar Pelli. It includes significant city amenities, such as a concert hall, a mosque, a public park as well as extensive commercial entertainment and retail facilities. Garry Emery explains his approach towards this project:

“Given its magnitude and centrality the Kuala Lumpur City Centre is the embodiment of Malaysian national confidence. It was essential for me as a designer to have a full grasp of the range of factors that could affect the design of signage for this significant national project: climatic, cultural, historical and philosophical factors.” (Emery, 2002)

Accordingly the studio commenced the design process with detailed cultural research and analysis as well as developed certain principles for design at an initial stage. Their “design philosophy” included the following:

“We wish to express the genius loci of Malaysia in both explicit and implicit local references, combining them in a modern international spirit. We would derive form and decoration from Malaysian traditions stylised to appeal to a

modern local and international community. We would chose colours on the basis of local cultural references and religious traditions. The significance of Islamic calligraphy, geometric principles and Mosque building traditions would have a direct bearing on our design deliberations with regard to graphic style, application of decoration and colour and the basis for three-dimensional form design.” (Emery, 2002)

Furthermore, Emery makes clear that their design approach for the environmental graphics program – according to the complexity and scale of the project – strived to respond directly to the design philosophy and cultural agenda of the architecture, urban planning, landscape and other principal design elements. “Our design intention was to provide a comprehensive graphics program that is appropriate to the overall development and also relevant to the traditional and contemporary Malaysian culture.” (Emery, 2002) Accordingly, traditional Malaysian cultural arts motives were re-interpreted in a contemporary context with the Islamic geometric principles incorporated into the graphics and signage – altogether demonstrating a from my perspective highly successful strategy and appropriate approach for intercultural design projects.

### c. PHYSICAL VERSUS VIRTUAL CONTEXT

Having introduced these international visual language systems we had now the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with standardized systems of visual communication while observing the richness of local variations. As I pointed out before, these examples of graphic signage can give interesting references for the design of visual icons in digital interfaces. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that there is one major difference between the introduced systems and any kind of screen-based communication. It is important to realize, that while signage systems are deeply embedded in their locality and physical context, working within the realm of digital media we cannot rely on such a defined physical environment as the context of the audience interacting with the computer is constantly shifting.

In contrast to signage which makes use of clear physical affordances in order to communicate, digital media operate in a space of decontextualised virtuality. Everything we see on the computer screen is mere representation – virtual references to real objects. As interactive designers, we carefully need to consider what *working without a clear physical context* implies.

Therefore, it is proposed that this circumstance requires us to make additional efforts in establishing our visual language in order to communicate as clearly and unambiguously as possible in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings. Comparing a visual icon applied to a physical object, i.e. a door, to an icon on the computer screen, the former has naturally a second layer of information applied through its physical context while the latter needs to speak for itself. If the icon would not be clearly understandable by an audience, the physical environment could deliver additional clues to aid the communication, i.e. lavatory, while the virtual representation is more prone to misunderstandings. Furthermore, working without a real-world context I consider it important to pay attention to carefully developing the virtual context we establish through our interface design as context can help the audience to relate provided information to existing knowledge and aid understanding.

During the last section we have now discussed various issues related to international visual communication, drawing from the discourse in graphic design. Within this context we have raised the question if visual design can indeed be regarded as universal language which transcends cultural boundaries – as often assumed within the design community. Additionally we have discussed international standards in visual communication aiding transnational compatibility and presented examples of public information systems in a variety of countries. To conclude with, we have directed our attention to the fact that there is nevertheless a basic distinction between these systems and digital media, which operate solely on a basis of virtual representation.

These considerations have been useful in order to reflect on current systems of pictorial information which can be regarded as efficient and often sophisticated ways of intercultural communication. In this sense, it is proposed that the relatively young field of new media design can draw from the experience of well-developed methods

for intercultural communication existing within graphic design, such as international signage systems, in order to integrate such knowledge for the practice of designing interfaces.

## C. ISSUES IN INTERFACE DESIGN

Let us now in the following chapter briefly take a look into the discourse of international interface design within Human Computer Interaction, which is most frequently applied in the field of new media. Studies in this context often explore issues of *Internationalization* and *Localization* of interfaces in order to reach a global audience, in many cases drawing from cultural models such as the one developed by Geert Hofstede, as introduced earlier – which is a primary reference for research in this context (i.e. Marcus and West Gould, 2000 or Evers, 2003).

Therefore, let us at this point outline some of the issues that need to be considered when engaging in intercultural interface design. Del Galdo highlights in “Internationalisation and Translation” cultural differences and local conventions which need to be taken into account, including:

### FORMATS

+ *Numeric Formats*

+ *Measures*: Currency formats and units of length

+ *Time Format*: The display of time zones for international and translations needs to use either the full name of the time zone or a notation of time indicating the Greenwich Meridian or Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). The more popular alphabetic codes such as PST, EST or CET should not be used.

### ICONS AND SYMBOLS

When designing or selecting existing icons, care must be taken to use an icon or symbol that adequately represents an object internationally. Hence, del Galdo provides a “set of guidelines for the design of icons and symbols for an international market” (Del Galdo, 1990):

- + Designs of icons and symbols should be simple.
- + The icon or symbol should be representative or symbolize the necessary action, or object.
- + Always check international standards for symbols and icons to ensure that you use existing internationally recognized icons, and that you do not give a different or inconsistent meaning to a similar or existing icon.
- + Avoid using text with icons as it is difficult to translate.
- + Design the icon or symbol with the entire intended market for the product in mind.
- + Testing should cover suitability for all intended markets.
- + Do not use culture specific icons, such as mailboxes.

## COLOUR

We naturally also need to be aware that colours have different connotations in different countries. In addition to the *symbolism* associated with colour also *preferences* for colours or colour-combinations differ across cultures. Context is everything here, as also every culture has multiple layers of meaning. Therefore it is suggested that designers need to conduct project-specific research, exploring questions such as the customary significance of colour, its social and historical context as well as aesthetic background.

*Even the colours of nature are subject to regional context.* While the sky is blue everywhere – depending upon where you live – a clear blue sky might be a predictable daily occurrence or a noteworthy break in the typical cloud cover. A spot of green might be an oasis in the desert or a patch of moss in a rainforest. Red, on the other hand is universally associated with blood. Minerals, because of their innate rarity, have a fairly consistent hierarchy of value throughout the world – as shown by the use of gold, silver, and bronze for Olympic medals. (Peterson and Cullen, 2000) In *Global Graphics: Color* Peterson and Cullen propose in my opinion an insightful strategy:

“Pay literal attention to the local color. What is the color of the landscape? What colors are houses painted? What colors do the inhabitants wear? What colors are used in traditional crafts? The color or colors you need may not be among these, but you’ll understand the color vernacular familiar to the audience you are trying to reach.” (Peterson and Cullen, 2000)



## TEXT AND CHARACTER SET

Text is naturally another crucial issue in internationalization of interfaces. Del Galdo (1990) provides the following suggestions:

- + Avoid using acronyms and abbreviations, as they are difficult to translate.
- + Do not use culturally specific examples. Examples that include national games such as baseball (US) or plays on words are not suitable for international markets.
- + Avoid references to national, racial, religious, sexist stereotypes and individuals of alternative lifestyles.
- + Always use consistent terminology throughout the interface, describing concepts, items or actions consistently throughout the interface.

In terms of character sets there exist a variety of challenges on which we can gain insights outlining issues for the example of the Arabic language, according to Portaneri and Amara (1996).

## CASE STUDY: ISSUES IN INTERFACE DESIGN FOR THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Arabic text is written from right to left, and therefore mixed Arabic/Latin strings include text in *both directions* presented on the same line – leading to a number of technical difficulties. Furthermore, the *global screen direction needs to be oriented from the top right-hand corner*, which is essential for user interfaces and menus, such as in applications. The Arabic character font moreover has the particular need to be always written in “cursive” or “handwritten” form, with *characters linked together as if written by hand*. The linking rules are well defined, but the display font must be adapted to this style and able to join all characters in order to avoid blank columns between characters. (Portaneri and Amara, 1996)

Furthermore, *local differences* need to be taken into account. While Arabic writing is the same for all Arab countries, the speaking of Arabic may however be different – such as the case for month names which vary between North Africa, around the Nile Valley area and in Middle Eastern countries. Also there are two possibilities for numeral shapes: In North African countries the digits used are “Arabic digits” while in Middle Eastern countries they are “Hindi shapes.” Additional issues to be considered are the

need to always specify a complete word, as abbreviations and acronyms do not exist in Arabic, as well as the necessity of dual keyboard management allowing the user to input Arabic and Latin characters. (Portaneri and Amara, 1996)

This case study effectively outlines the immense complexities that can be involved in intercultural interface design. Consequently it is suggested for designers to dive for themselves deeper into the literature extensively existing on such issues within this discourse – while this work will continue to move on in order to explore the complexity of intercultural design from a variety of perspectives.

Nevertheless, in concluding this chapter I would still like to emphasize the need to encounter the material existing within this discourse of Human Computer Interaction with critical reflection. Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden from the University of Cape Town bring the underlying problematic concisely to the point:

*“The role of visual conventions in users’ interpretation of the web has been addressed at a rather superficial level in existing studies of usability on the web. These studies tend to originate from a concern with the ‘export’ of software to culturally different contexts, and consequently focus on the relatively crude practicalities of ‘internationalisation’ and ‘regionalisation’ (e.g. Del Galdo and Nielsen 1996).”*

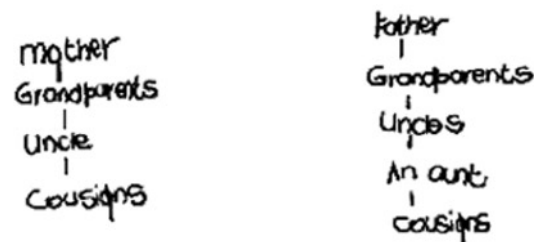
(Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden, 2002. Emphasis mine.)

Questioning the Western cultural assumptions underpinning the web’s evolving navigational conventions their research with a group of South African students has shown that “challenges involved in producing interfaces which communicate across boundaries of culture and literacy require much more than superficial changes in appearance.” (Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden, 2002) The analyses suggest that there are

“clear cultural dimensions to the interpretation of common visual navigational conventions on the web. These differences did not manifest primarily on the ‘representational’ level. In other words, for the users we studied, the problem was not the relatively superficial one of not recognising a certain type of

mailbox or trashcan. Instead, they involve the *assumptions we commonly make about the organisation and visual representation of information structures.*" (Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden, 2002. Emphasis mine.)

The conventional Western family tree (grandparents, parents, children) structuring families according to generations, with a patrilineal line of descent, is a basic metaphor underlying many of the logical hierarchies we use to structure information. Nevertheless, such "hierarchical classificational tree diagrams are a culture-specific visual form which can operate to exclude people on both graphical and ideological levels." (Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden, 2002) The unconventional structure which one student produced when asked to draw a family tree illustrates this point:



"This South African student's 'family tree' constructs two lineages, one maternal and one paternal."

Source: Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden, 2002.

Hence, this study reminded us of the importance to "identify cultural biases in the visual conventions we use to communicate, and to investigate new, less exclusive approaches." (Walton, Vukovic' and Marsden, 2002) Having emphasized this, as well as the need to consider the discussions within the discourse of Human Computer Interaction with a critical stance – as they tend to be limited to formal or technical aspects of intercultural design naively disregarding sensitive and controversial issues in most cases – let us therefore move on and focus our attention on exactly those dimensions of intercultural design within the next section.

## D. REPRESENTATION AND ETHICS IN CROSS-CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

*“Representations of otherness form part of the social construction of reality and the negotiation of the future. Images of others are a form of cultural polemics; they are contested and are themselves forms of contestation.”*

JAN NEDERVEEN PIETERSEE, “White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture.”<sup>4</sup>

Within the following section I propose that as a designer involved in designing across cultures, it is essential to consider practices of cross-cultural representation, which are a significant yet in the current practice often problematic part of intercultural design. As related to our prior discussions, considering that communication has a consequence, and that intercultural communication is situated within a framework of power, designers when involved in creating representations of other cultures are exercising a form of *definitional power*. Therefore, when engaging in such *constructions of reality*, designers need to be aware of their role as well as knowledgeable of the potential consequences of their choices.

The field of sociology has developed numerous critical theories dealing with issues of cross-cultural representation within the mass media, including postcolonial studies or media studies. Nevertheless, as I see it, the field of digital design and visual communication, which is itself a major producer of these kinds of representation, has hardly drawn from these discourses nor acknowledged them within their professional literature. In “Postcolonial Media Theory” art historian María Fernández points out that “postcolonial studies and electronic media theory have developed parallel to one another but with very few points of intersection.” (Fernández, 1999) Even more, as I observed in my research, any reference to these critical theories seem to be strangely absent from any discussions of design across cultures – whether studies on interface design, or international visual communication.

Nevertheless, the issue of representation seems in my understanding an essential one concerning any kind of genuine intercultural dialogue. At present representational practices in the field of international visual communication and advertising are in numerous cases more than problematic – as we will observe throughout this chapter. Strangely enough, critical theories of representation are lacking within the field of design – which I can only interpret as a silent consent of the profession to the current practices. We all know that the advertising industry is the economically most profitable field within visual communication, and it seems to be not desirable within the design-community to openly criticize their practices. Nevertheless, we must realize that also digital design, creating websites and cd-roms, as well as producing television- or video content, is often intimately involved with commercial marketing, and therefore, has the same responsibility to incorporate such critical studies into its body of theory.

During my research I realized the unfortunate separation of critical media theory within the field of cultural studies and social sciences from the professional literature within design and visual communication. Among the anyways sparse material on intercultural design – considering the supposed prominence of this issue in a globalizing and economically interrelated world – I only could find one single discussion of the problematics inherent in issues of cross-cultural representation (from which I quote above). I cannot help but understand this as a silent consent within the design world to un-reflexively use their skill in order to operate as tools used to re-enforce certain existing structures of power (while making a profit).

Anyhow, I would like to emphasize at this point that the literature supporting this chapter concerned with cross-cultural representation, is *solely drawn from the sociological discourse* – and I propose that designers have an urgent need to integrate such critical reflection into design theory. This seems substantial, considering the fact that sociologists are often confined to the stage of critical theory, while designers are actually dealing with the practical application – creating representations.

Additionally, I would like to point out that the following discussions aim to invite the designer to reflect on the wider context in which cross-cultural design takes place. It is therefore not limited to specific design issues – in contrast to the previous section

– but presumes that a broader, multidisciplinary approach will enable designers to make more informed and sensitive design choices.

Having said this, let us proceed to discuss current representational practices in cross-cultural consumption, primarily drawing on the two following sources, which are both part of the discourse in cultural studies:

*The Dynamics and Ethics of Cross-Cultural Consumption* by Constance Classen and David Howes as well as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's *From the Imperial Family to the Transnational Imaginary: Media Spectatorship in the Age of Globalization*.

In this context these studies appeared appropriate as they provide valuable insights on media consumption and propose a useful framework for discussion. Therefore, we will adapt the structure put forward by Classen and Howes, distinguishing the following contexts within our exploration:

1. consumption of Western goods by non-Western peoples;
2. consumption of non-Western goods by the West;
3. global marketing of Western goods.

## 1. CONSUMING THE WEST

With respect to the trans-cultural marketing of consumer goods the most commonly raised ethical concern is that the spread of a single regime of products and values around the world will work to destroy cultural diversity and end up creating a globally standardized culture. According to this view, we will one day live in a world in which everyone has access to and consumes the same things. No matter where you go in the world, there will be a McDonald's restaurant, Hollywood movies, Adidas running shoes, and an American Express office. This vision of a global consumer culture is particularly disturbing for diverse Third World peoples, some of whom have only recently emerged from colonial regimes, and now find themselves being apparently "Coca-colonized" by an influx of consumer goods from the West. In addition,

"the global marketing of Western products is criticized not only for spreading Western values (while enriching Western coffers), but also for spreading what

many people perceive as materialist, decadent values. Junk food, Barbie dolls, designer jeans, Playboy magazines. Happiness in a dishwasher, social status in an automobile, beauty in a bottle of hair colour. These are the goods and values the West is ostensibly offering the rest of the world.“

(Classen and Howes, 2000)

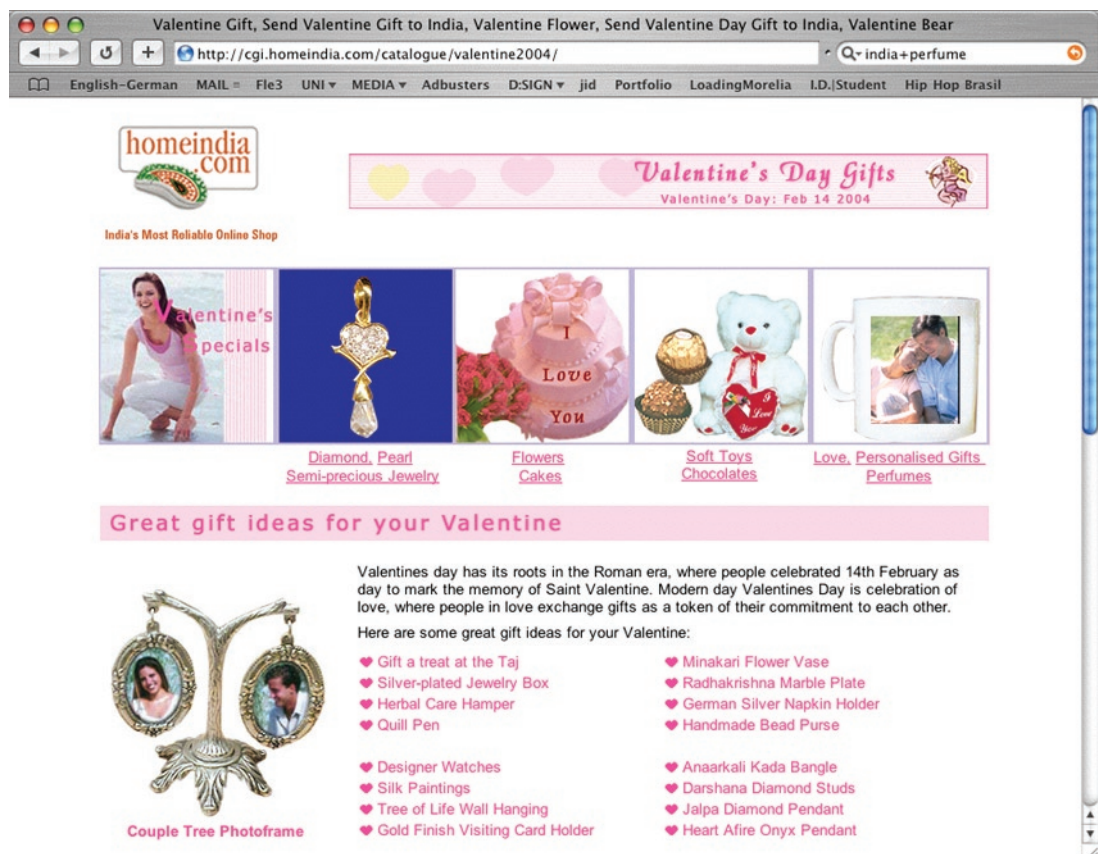
In this context, we need to realize that Western consumer goods are also closely allied to Western lifestyles and there is difficulty of receiving the former while ignoring or rejecting the latter. In India, for example, where Western-style public displays of affection are considered improper, global marketers expect now that Indians will soon turn to imitating, having watched such displays in American movies and television shows. This would open the market for a whole new range of consumer products, as a transnational business executive explains: “When you want to be physically closer to people a lot, then you tend to want to look better, smell better. So the market [in India] will grow for cosmetics, perfumes, after-shaves, mouthwashes and so on”

(Dyer in Classen and Howes, 2000)

Related to the view that the increased cultural exchange through globalization will result in cultural homogenization, Colors Magazine published Issue 36 on “Monoculture” illustrating this point sarcastically:

“Being the same is the biggest trend around, and growing. To get with the majority COLORS recommends the following: Eat bland fast food in chain restaurants. (To suit global palates strong flavors are not a priority.) Buy your loved one a Valentine’s card. (Kids cut school in India to celebrate the US holiday.) Name your kids Kevin or Cindy in Italy. Chinese companies won’t promote you without an American MBA. After surfing the English-speaking Internet, check out your local movie theater, (all but one of 1998’s 20 highest grossing movies in Europe were American.) If you’re looking for something a little more authentic; something to help you get away from it all. Too bad.”<sup>5</sup>

Finding examples of this phenomenon in the Internet is not hard at all: Homeindia.com – “India’s most reliable online shop” – offer Valentine’s Day gifts on their website in an unmistakably Western look.<sup>6</sup>



Similarly on Coca-Cola's homepage in China we can find illustrations only of kids with occidental features as well as a detailed introduction to the history of basketball. This again closes the circle to our topic of intercultural design – as designers we must be aware that we are part of a bigger mechanism, links in a chain. We need to take a look at the bigger picture in order to identify our own role.

Clearly, within the field of electronic media we can also find a massive presence of such monopolies of global corporations. Consider that Microsoft is supplying 98% of the world's operating systems. Similarly, within the World Wide Web we can find companies exercising strong dominance, such as Google, Amazon, AOL or Microsoft's Hotmail. Among visual designers the most widely used applications are products of only a handful of American companies, including Adobe, Macromedia, Microsoft and Apple. We can of course imagine how this starting point will be reflected in the "diversity" of user interfaces.



Colors Magazine's website on Monoculture contains a parody of the spectacle of choice which is seeking to divert our attention from the actual sameness promoted: the interface sarcastically shows the loss of meaningful choices, when there is in fact only one choice: English.

## HOMOGENISATION VERSUS DIVERSITY IN DESIGN AND MEDIA

Anyhow, in this discussion of homogenisation we must avoid a one-sided view and keep in mind that there are also equally strong trends towards hybridization – people will always adapt the consumed goods to their own culture, reverting its original meaning according to their own worldview. In this sense, these processes are not entirely negative, of course, as global mass culture does not so much replace local culture as coexist with it. According to these theories of hybridization, this will result in the emergence of a “new diversity” originating from a cultural mixture.

In any case, I strongly agree with Ella Shohat and Robert Stam stating that “[t]he problem lies not in the exchange but in the unequal terms on which the exchange take place.” (Shohat and Stam, 1996) As I see it, especially considering this kind of subversion, we cannot deny that there is cultural pressure exercised from the West – a pressure which obviously occurs in an economically and historically very specific context.

“Although direct colonial rule has largely come to an end, much of the world remains entangled in neocolonialism, that is a conjuncture in which political and military control has given way to abstract, semi-indirect, largely economic forms of control whose linchpin is a close alliance between foreign capital and the indigenous elite. Partially as a result of colonialism, the contemporary global scene is now dominated by a coterie of powerful nation-states, consisting basically of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. This domination is economic (‘the Group of Seven,’ the IMF, the World Bank, GATT), political (the five veto-holding members of the UN Security Council), military (the new ‘unipolar’ NATO), and techno-informational-cultural (Hollywood, UPI, Reuters, France Presse, CNN).” (Shohat and Stam, 1996)

In terms of cinema, few people in the First World realize that Hollywood, despite its hegemonic position, contributes only to a fraction of the annual worldwide production of feature films. In fact, the cinemas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America clearly constitute the majority of cinema in the world. If one includes films made for TV, India is the *leading* producer of fiction films around the world, with an annual production of between 700–1,000 feature films. Burma, Pakistan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, or Bangladesh produce over fifty feature films a year – taken together, over half of the world production in a year is produced by Asian countries. Third World Cinema, in this sense, far from being a marginal appendage to First World Cinema, constitutes arguably the *majority* cinema. Nonetheless, it is rarely featured in cinemas, video stores or “standard” film histories in the West. Conversely,

“[t]he yearly Oscar ceremonies inscribe Hollywood’s arrogant provincialism: the audience is global, yet the product promoted is almost always American, the ‘rest of the world’ being corralled into the restricted category of the ‘foreign film’.” (Shohat and Stam, 1996)

This situation might be of course related to the communication infrastructure of empire, which enables the imperial countries to monitor global communications and shape the image of world events. Summarizing a status quo which constitutes the essential problematic highlighted in this chapter, Shohat and Stam argue:

“(T)he global distribution of power still tends to make the First World countries cultural ‘transmitters’ and to reduce most Third World countries to the status of ‘receivers.’ *While culture is produced everywhere, only some locales enjoy the power to project their cultural products around the world.*”

(Shohat and Stam, 1996. Emphasis mine.)

## 2. CONSUMING THE “OTHER”

Another dynamic which brings up ethical questions concerns the consumption of non-Western goods by the West. Working as a designer in the context of intercultural design it is therefore important to consider the issue of representation, recognizing the ways in which people from other cultures are represented within Western popular culture.

## a. CONSTRUCTS OF DIFFERENCE

Within the discourse of cultural and media studies the term of *the “other”* is employed to describe certain constructions of difference. In psychological terms, the process of “othering” – separating the “self” from the “other” – is essential for identity building: The child needs to psychologically separate itself from the parent in order to assume an individual identity. Likewise, within social interaction we are constantly engaged in this process of “othering” in order to redefine our constantly shifting identity. Essentially, how we see ourselves is related to how we see others.

This just as a general remark on our psychological desire to separate the ‘self’ from the “other” – within society and culture nevertheless we must realize that such a construction of “otherness” is always situated within a context of power: Of being in the position to see and define the “other”, as well as project this to a wider audience. Creating representations of otherness is therefore an exercise of power. As Ashis Nandy, until recently Director of the renowned Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, stated at the conference on *Cultural Diversity in a Globalising World*, nowadays “dominance is exercised less and less through economic pressure and more and more through categories—unless you define, you are defined.”

(Nandy, 2003)

Understanding the power inherent in creating representations, let us examine such representations of otherness within Western consumer culture, marketing and media: *How is difference constructed and how is it used?*

Notably, as pointed out by Philip Crang and Peter Jackson,

“commodity culture is intimately involved in the production of difference itself [...]. At a more practical level, though, the crucial issue is what sorts of cultural and geographical difference are constructed [...]? What kinds of multicultural imaginaries underlie this commodified production of a world of difference?”

(Crang and Jackson, 2002)

## b. COMMODIFICATION OF “OTHERNESS”

First of all, consider that who or what the “other” is naturally always depends on our own position.

In the context of this chapter we will critically review the imagery and marketing strategies within the dominant visual culture in the West, and observe how countries and people in the so-called “rest of the world” are often depicted and marketed to the Western audience as exotic “other”. In *The Dynamics and Ethics of Cross-Cultural Consumption* Constance Classen and David Howes illustrate this issue:

“While Western consumers often manifest a desire for ‘authenticity’ when consuming the products and images of other cultures, it is authenticity from a Western, and not an indigenous, perspective.” (Classen and Howes, 2000)

However, such a constructions of “otherness” are not necessarily the case: An emphasis of a product’s foreign origin as being exotic is not always desired and therefore often disguised or downplayed by non-Western marketers selling to the West – as for example in brand names like Sony or Toyota. In this case furthermore advertising is employed to make a foreign product appear reassuringly Western.

Consequently, whereas

“Western cars may be advertised in Japan with Western actors, Japanese cars are not advertised in the West with Japanese actors, but in ‘typical’ Western settings. This situation may have to do both with a distrust of foreignness in the West and the lack of a ‘prestige-value’ associated with non-Western peoples.” (Classen and Howes, 2000)

When employed nevertheless, we can observe that within Western popular culture representations of people from cultures other than what we could broadly term “European/American consumer culture” or races other than Caucasian, more often than not re-enforce dominant stereotypes manifesting a status quo of Western economic and cultural domination.<sup>7</sup>

At a closer look we can realize that, when employed, representations of “otherness” are widely used as mechanisms of commodification within consumer societies in the

First World, turning cultural difference into an object to be consumed. This cross-cultural consumption takes place in a historically and economically predetermined framework, and needs to be considered in this context.

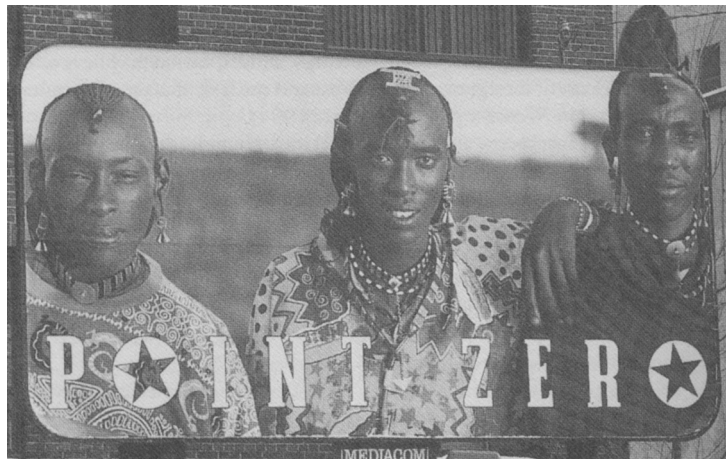
Let us therefore, discuss two mechanisms of commodification of “otherness” – exoticisation and aesthetisation – as well as their implications.

### EXOTICISATION

One common way of constructing difference is through exoticisation, a process of appropriating foreign people and places in order to represent them as exotic objects of desire. Separated from their actual context, exotic places are represented as Paradise, and their inhabitants as mystical people living an original way of life close to nature. This limited perception of foreign cultures has been termed “the tourist gaze” within cultural studies – describing a desire to construct foreign people and places in a highly romantic, naïve and not contemporary way.

“In general, the only time when the foreign nature of an imported product is emphasized in the West by its marketers (whether these be Western or non-Western) is when part of its appeal to Westerners lies in its exotic nature. Examples of this are Colombian coffee, Middle-Eastern carpets, or African folk art. In such cases stereotypical imagery of otherness is usually employed to promote the products, such as an illustration of a Colombian coffee picker in traditional clothing leading a donkey, or of a Middle-Eastern man with billowing pants and turned-up shoes flying a magic carpet. The broad smiles on the faces of these product mascots indicate that ‘the natives are friendly’ to Westerners – in other words, that the product’s foreignness is appealing rather than threatening. At the same time, *the evident Western desire to perceive Third World peoples as ‘primitive’ indicates an interest on the part of the West in locating Third World peoples in a subordinate position.*”

(Classen and Howes, 2000. Emphasis mine.)

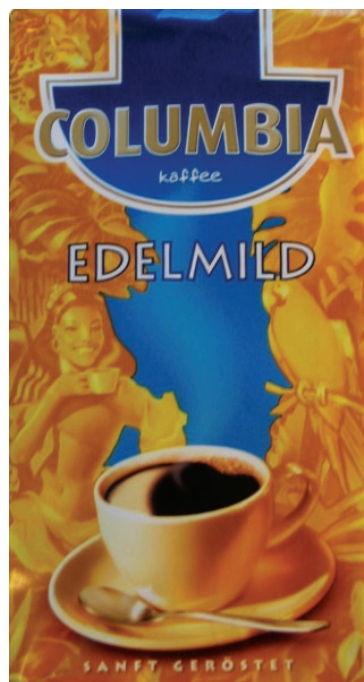


“Point Zero” fashion billboard in Montreal. Photograph by Mediacom.

Source: Classen and Howes, 2000.

This analysis by Classen and Howes, leaves little doubt that we are here moving within a context of cultural imperialism.

Decontextualising foreign places, i.e. ignoring political, social or environmental problematics within Third World countries, Westerners tend to perceive them as exotic paradise on which to project a desire for “liminal spaces” – spaces which allow experimentation outside of the structure of daily life, for a certain amount of time. This is certainly the case for marketing strategies of numerous tourist destinations.



“Columbia Cafe.” Photograph by Simona Schimanovich

In reality, stereotypical representations are sometimes so ingrained in marketing of other cultures that they are difficult to notice. Consider the following quotes from industry investment handbooks, as example how states sell their countries and their people, stating that Jamaicans have an “easy going lifestyle” and are the “friendliest, most industrious people you will meet anywhere”. (Klak in Classen and Howes, 2000) As we can recognize, “othering” is a very powerful phenomenon indeed – it already belongs to our expectations, affirming myths of “otherness” that have been constructed for so long. In her work *Black Looks: Race and Representation* bell hooks strikingly illustrates how certain discourses of otherness are produced:

“The world of fashion has come to understand that selling products is heightened by the exploitation of Otherness. [...] [M]any ads that focus on Otherness make no explicit comments, or rely solely on visual messages, but the recent fall Tweeds catalogue provides an excellent example of the way contemporary culture exploits notions of Otherness with both visual images and text. The catalogue cover shows a map of Egypt. Inserted into the heart of the country, so to speak, is a photo of a white male (an *Out of Africa* type) holding an Egyptian child in his arms. Behind them is not the scenery of Egypt as a modern city, but rather shadowy silhouettes resembling huts and palm trees. Inside the copy quotes Gustave Flaubert’s comments from Flaubert in Egypt. For seventy-five pages Egypt becomes a landscape of dreams, and its darker-skinned people background, scenery to highlight whiteness, and the longing of whites to inhabit, if only for a time, the world of the Other. The front page copy declares:

‘We did not want our journey to be filled with snapshots of an antique land. Instead we wanted to rediscover our clothing in the context of a different culture. Was it possible, we wondered, to express our style in an unaccustomed way, surrounded by Egyptian colours, Egyptian textures, even bathed in an ancient Egyptian light?’

Is this not imperialist nostalgia at its best – potent expression of longing for the ‘primitive’?” (hooks, 1992)

Accordingly, it is important to realize that *how the “other” is presented has more to do with the one who constructs “otherness” than with the “other”*. Nevertheless, this mechanism has profound consequences for people being “otherised” and regarded as exotic.

*Being exotic limits*. It confines ways of being known and representing oneself in more complex ways, as a complex individual and member of a developed or developing society. By projecting and manifesting a desire for the “primitive”, original ways of life, close to nature, in a paradisaical landscape, Westerners are exercising power – pressing people who are inhabitants of these imaginary dreamlands into a framework of representation which hinders their development of a more complex identity.

“The simplistic and traditionalistic imagery of ‘otherness’ used in product promotions and travel advertisements hinders the inhabitants of the countries concerned in asserting an identity as modern, industrially developed or developing peoples with complex lifestyles.

Furthermore, perceiving their exoticized image in the mirror of the West, non-Westerners sometimes exoticize themselves, in turn. This can have two contrasting effects. The first is to try and de-exoticize oneself by becoming more Western – wearing Western clothing, living in Western-style houses, and so on. The second is to internalize the West’s exotic image of oneself.”  
(Classen and Howes, 2000)

The individual psychological consequences of this double-bind, as well as the consequences for the affected culture are without doubt highly problematic. This is to make clear that representation of other cultures for Western consumption is not an act occurring in a socio-political vacuum, but requires sensitivity and deeper consideration. Designers working within such a context must be aware that they are agents operating in a space of cross-cultural or cross-racial domination, where they are in the position of either manifesting or questioning certain mechanisms of power.



As Crang and Jackson state,

“commodity culture provides an opportunity to consume the products of various different ethnicities but in a highly contrived and controlled way, strictly on the consumer’s own terms. It is by ‘eating the Other’, hooks asserts, that one asserts one’s power and privilege.” (Crang and Jackson, 2002)

Designers need to be aware when engaging in this kind of cross-cultural, especially cross-racial, representation that they are operating within a context of power and of a relationship which has, in numerous cases, been deeply shaped by a long history of colonialism and oppression. Therefore, I propose that designers must develop an understanding of the social, political and economic framework they are operating within – nowadays more than ever, considering the interrelated world we are living in.

#### AESTHETISATION AND IRONIC CONSUMPTION

“[C]onsumers aestheticize the fearful object of their desire” for a “ ‘world of difference’ which they encounter and attempt to contain on their own terms.” (Crang and Jackson, 2002)

Context is everything when communicating across cultures – therefore decontextualised and purely aesthetic representations of other cultures tend to be problematic. With a gaze that is merely aesthetic, oriented towards fashions, styles and trends, representations are often superficial and endangered with stereotyping and insensitivity. hooks argues that such commodification of difference promotes

“paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization.” (hooks in Kaplan, 1999)

Aestheticisation is however a common way of commodifying the “other”, while avoiding a genuine debate. Purely aesthetic representations of foreign cultures within a contextual vacuum also prepare them for ironic consumption.

The following example from fashion design – which doesn't directly relate to our subject – but nevertheless gives a good example of how aestheticisation and ironic consumption work: In her article “So hip it hurts: The poverty of America's deep south – where I grew up – is now imitated by Britain's trendiest. How sick is that?” Carrie Gibson sharply criticizes how subcultures are commodified and consumed ironically within the fashion world. She argues that the new trend of dressing like so-called “white trash” people

“does raise a worrying question: why are we making a joke out of others' misery? [...] They are poor, and powerless; hence they are fair game for our contempt. There seems to be some sort of assumption that these unfashionable, poor people have chosen to live in a house on wheels; to drive clapped-out Camaros; to wear tacky clothes; to have out-of-date hairstyles. But here, we choose to don a costume of poverty because we can afford to, and we don't even consider what it must be like for those who can't.”<sup>8</sup>

Decontextualising representations or images means to simply disregard the power of context. Now it can of course be questioned if everything always has to be seen in context – especially when it comes to creating new trends inspired by other cultures or, in this case, subcultures. The problematic here is this: *If everything starts to become a question of mere aesthetics, how do we take responsibility?*

Irony does not foster a real dispute but is used as a *substitute* for ethics. It serves as a space to articulate social commentary while keeping a critical distance. *Irony allows to keep a protective stance*, controlling something that makes you feel uneasy.

An appalling example of an ironic marketing strategy are the campaigns by Italian fashion company “Diesel”. Aimed at a middle-to-upper-class, very fashion-conscious and youthful audience the advertising campaigns promoting their products are exposing their “hip” nonchalance by making fun of their own attitudes and advertising techniques themselves.

Although this approach might be interesting in general, it certainly comes along in highly problematic ways. An example which I personally find outrageous when

considered more deeply is a campaign which Diesel ran two years ago a part of their general motto, “Diesel – For Successful Living”, with the name *Guide to Luxury Living in Today’s Africa*.<sup>9</sup>



“Guide to Luxury Living in Today’s Africa.” Source: Diesel

“Monday, February 19, 2001. THE DAILY AFRICAN – AFRICA’S BIGGEST-SELLING QUALITY DAILY  
Africa agrees on financial aid to Europe. 6 Billions AFROs designated to fight hunger.  
By Ndugu Llokko, Kinshasa.

As a result of the terrifying eyewitness reports from UN observers based in Great Britain, France and Germany, the African Community spokeswoman Maputo Nklare announced yesterday the Community’s decision to immediately address the growing problems in Europe. “The humane aspect of the tribal fighting in Great Britain’s Northumbria and Scotland where charity organisations and UN OBSERVERS report that over half a million people have been slaughtered, calls for action. The fact that a considerable amount of African capital has been invested in start-up companies in the developing countries of Europe, must be addressed”. Ms Mkara said during a press conference at the AU Headquarters in Nairobi Tuesday, that the AU aid is said to exceed AFRO 4 billion (US\$ 6 billion). The first planes with medicine, canned food and blankets will arrive in France and Great Britain by the end of this week.

Who needs a job? The New Economy brings wealth, but poor service. In today’s Africa you’ll find ways to enjoy your new wealth, even if it means you have to open the champagne yourself.”



“Guide to Luxury Living in Today’s Africa.” *Source: Diesel*

“Monday, February 19, 2001. THE DAILY AFRICAN – AFRICA’S BIGGEST-SELLING QUALITY DAILY  
Giant health program to fight European flu.

African Union spends billions to save Europeans from flu epidemic.

You find them everywhere you go – eyes glazed with fever, noses running and desperately searching to find just about anything they can put in their mouths to sooth their sore throats. They’ve got the flu and they’ve got it bad. It’s been around Europe for centuries. Without any medicine to relieve it, the poor Europeans rely on God (most of them have one God; Voodoo still has only a small portion of the continent’s faithful converted). One may argue that the flu isn’t deadly, but it’s a proven fact that the elderly and weaker Europeans die in large numbers every year during flu epidemics. With a diet almost bereft of vitamin C, which is very scarce – especially in the northern regions where no citrus fruits can survive, the International Red Spear has called for caution and solidarity. “It’s like we didn’t have a cure for common malaria”, Ghanfa Killamanyearly, chairman of the Congo Red Spear said after a flu summit. A giant health aid program for Europe was passed in the African Union yesterday.

How to cope with the heat – undress! When there doesn’t seem to be any space between the heat waves, and your beach holiday is too long coming, take a look at the latest vacations favoured around the luxurious Indian Ocean resorts Miwara and Kilwa Masoko. Here the “Beautiful People” dress up by simply undressing. The latest trends in underwear are such a pleasure to the eye that nobody wants to hide them anymore they flaunt them instead. So when someone knocks on your door and you shout, “I’m in my underwear!” you can expect them to knock again.”

While, as I see it, this campaign has an interesting idea of subverting the roles for once, and is able to shock at the first glance – there is nothing that follows this first reaction. It seems to be simply irony for irony’s sake, putting a number of African models in an environment of decadent luxury – and that was it. No form of dialogue is encouraged – the ironic treatment hollows out any possibility for discussion of real problematics – and this is obviously the point. As First-world Diesel-consumers we can afford the luxury to bemusedly imagine: “What if things would be the other way around?” – but anyways, we’re actually much too busy... Whatever the issue: in fact we couldn’t care less.

It would be hard to find a more concise example of how “*ads glamorize and seek to legitimate unequal transnational economic relations*” than this campaign. (Kaplan, 1999. Emphasis mine.) As Caren Kaplan significantly argues,

“the consumer knows about centers and peripheries in a number of contradictory ways and must be brought into a particular transnational logic, drawn through visual and financial consumption into a seemingly voluntary and historically specific relationship with global politics.” (Kaplan, 1999)

Another campaign called *Taking Action* exposes how far Diesel’s “social engagement” really goes: The campaign depicts Diesel’s beautiful people in the mid of deeply subversive and revolutionary action which will leave every system crumbling – true rebels in the following flavours:

Respect your mom – Free the goldfish – Bowling is beautiful – Marry young – Hold more hands – Share your bathwater – Legalize the 4 day weekend – More green traffic lights – Plant more flowers <sup>10</sup>

“Taking Action” á la Diesel:

“More green traffic lights!”

Source: Diesel



No, wait – in fact it is all *much* easier: simply wear your Diesel-clothes from top to toe and they will do the rest for you. Promised! – On the other hand: what did we really expect from a company which advertises: “Shopping is the meaning of life”? – Of course, it is all *ironic*. But doesn’t irony seem more like a bad excuse to deny that anything in life has *actual significance* – while immersing ourselves in the hedonistic narcissism where consumer culture wants to see us?

This is the very logic which is also enforced by consumer environments as the mall – such “places of consumption encourage us to *think of ourselves not as links in a chain but rather, as the center of the world.*” (Kaplan, 1999. Emphasis mine.) What we are hardly reminded of is the fact that

“[c]onsumption is also a mode of production; it *produces dominant images of a world of difference without boundaries, and it creates sites or places where these ideas become practice.* Mass consumption, as Robert David Sack puts it, is among ‘the most important means by which we become powerful geographical agents in our day-to-day lives.’ Yet trans/national geographic agency is not evenly distributed or unproblematically assumed. Back in the putative center, metropolitans have the luxury of manipulating the images of links and disjunctures, *fantasizing contact with difference while maintaining a comfortable distance.*” (Kaplan, 1999. Emphasis mine.)

This raises simultaneously questions about the *locus of responsibility* considering such decontextualised aesthetics: Is the designer responsible by commodifying and taking away the context, or the consumer who desires to contain the commodity on his or her own terms?

I would argue here that the act of decontextualisation and objectification in the first place could be regarded as more problematic, as it removes important original information which the consumer is deprived of and cannot consider when making her/his choice. (Though this is obviously not necessarily the case as in the prior examples.)

Situating the locus of responsibility certainly contains difficulties. An argument frequently put forward within the advertising industry, for example, is that advertising is just a mirror of society and subordinate to the demands of their clients. The corporate clients on the other hand argue that they are just producing what the consumers ask for and market it in a way they expect. So everything is the consumers fault, right?

As designers, whether working within advertising or other forms of visual communication, we do have the responsibility to develop an increased awareness and understanding of our role in creating and re-enforcing certain forms of culture. One of the main problems in the visual design community, as I see it, is that designers too often understand themselves as “beautifiers” or “decorators” who make “pretty things” – disregarding the wider socio-cultural or political aspects of their work. This makes designers an easy tool to use in order to enforce certain mechanisms. Conversely, I suggest that as designers we need to understand the cultural impact of our work and accept the consequences of our professional responsibility, acting accordingly.

### c. MARKETING DIVERSITY

*“Diversity, Whatever.”*

Slogan for a 1998–99 ad campaign for Eaton’s department store, Canada. (Klein, 2000: 119)

Within this context of consuming “otherness” let us now take a look at strategies of marketing *diversity* – which has become the predominant marketing message within

the last decades. Advertising campaigns like the one of “United Colors of Benetton” showing people of various ethnicities and races in perfect harmony have become iconic parts of our common visual consciousness. Celebrating cultural diversity and multiculturalism as consumers we give credit to the company for its noble social involvement.



Photograph by James Mollison. Source: Benetton.

Nevertheless, let us at this point examine such marketing strategies more closely, looking beneath the surface. We do feel that in spite of its seemingly best intentions there is something not ‘right’ with such diversity campaigns. In *Diversity, Inc. – On multi-culti advertising, this decade’s favorite marketing tool* Michael Rock articulates this gut feeling, stating that

“[the] problem lies in the paradox of a superficial celebration of cultural *difference* used to promote international corporate marketing strategies based on *sameness*; i.e. product identity and consistency.” (Rock, 1993)

So why would multinational corporations suddenly care so much about promoting diversity? Could one reason be that it simply serves as a more cost-effective way of marketing for global expansion, compared to the costly process of localization? Naomi Klein argues sarcastically:

“Rather than creating different advertising campaigns for different markets, campaigns could sell diversity itself, to all markets at once. The formula



maintained the one-size-fits-all cost benefits of old-style cowboy cultural imperialism, but ran far fewer risks of offending local sensibilities. Instead of urging the world to taste America, it calls out, like the Skittles slogan, to ‘Taste the Rainbow’.” (Klein, 2000: 117)

In this sense, diversity marketing seems just a gentler packaging for the homogenizing effect which is in itself creating a *monoculture* promoted by the West – it is, in effect, “mono-multiculturalism”. (Klein, 2000: 117)

Furthermore, whereas the images in advertisements seem to advocate a kind of uni-world culture, the actual products promoted, as well as the general design style are “unconditionally Western, first-world inventions.” (Rock, 1993) What we can generally deduce from these observations is that there is seemingly quite a gap between what is promised through ‘diversity advertising’ and what is in fact realized as a consequence of de-facto consumption. Klein eloquently summarizes this problematic:

“The branded multinationals may talk diversity, but the visible result of their actions is an army of teen clones marching – in ‘uniform,’ as the marketers say – into the global mall. Despite the embrace of polyethnic imagery, market-driven globalization doesn’t want diversity; quite the opposite. Its enemies are national habits, local brands and distinctive regional tastes.” (Klein, 2000: 129)

Another issue is that advertising multiculturalism in such ways is endangered with falling into the stereotypes it attempts to overcome. One example is a Benetton-advertisement with a black woman giving the breast to a white baby. Images like this can evoke certain colonial associations, for example considering places with a history like South Africa, where African maids were employed for raising the children in wealthy white families.



Photograph by Oliviero Toscani. Source: Benetton.

From another point of view, this advertisement of course clearly sends out a positive message of nurturing and relying on each other. – Anyhow, I want to point out that moving in such a context is like walking on thin ice.

Similarly like Oliviero Toscani, Benetton's art-director who introduced these multicultural and often provocative campaigns, Tibor Kalman progressed this approach of cultural diversity in marketing with his establishment of *Colors Magazine* for Benetton in 1990. (Farrelly, 1998) Generally, I see *Colors* as an important initiative in directing public attention towards mutual respect and cultural diversity. Personally I also appreciate Kalman's decision to use the exposure and budget he had available for founding a magazine with an agenda like *Colors*. One needs to acknowledge that in the time when *Colors* was established it stepped into a vacuum as a magazine aiming to raise awareness on cultural issues like racism while communicating to a world-wide audience. Even today it seems to be in a quite unique position within this niche, being published bi-monthly in 3 editions and 4 languages and sold in over 60 countries.

Nevertheless, from a critical point of view also in the case of *Colors* magazine obvious problematics arise because of its close entanglement with Benetton. According to Rock,

“*Colors* illustrates how even in questioning the myths that surround issues of race, the nexus of multiculturalism and marketing can inadvertently reinscribe the very stereotypes it attempts to overturn.” (Rock, 1993)

Rock argues concisely:

“But then again isn’t there a kind of style-driven imperialism at work when a handful of Manhattanites (or a handful of Romans, for that matter) presume to design – as is proclaimed on the cover of *Colors* – ‘a magazine for the rest of the world’? The bilingual structure (one language is always English) subtly reveals the idea. The English-speaking world is the default against which the Other is played consistently. The perspective is always Western, the backdrop always white.” (Rock, 1993)

From a critical perspective towards such strategies of marketing diversity there are also clear issues with *Colors*’ editorial and graphic style. Aiming to reach a young audience and being ready for fast consumption, *Colors* has been widely criticized to over-simplify the cross-cultural problematics it tries to address:

“A more subtle discussion around issues of domination of one race by another and differing experiences underlying cross-racial discourse – an oppressed race necessarily will view race issues differently than a supremacist one, for example – is difficult to manage with a big picture and a 75-word caption.” (Rock, 1993)

In general, the editorial position simply seems to be that under the façade of skin colour we are all the same, so why don’t we all just love one another? But is this in reality the case – is skin colour just a façade? Indonesian designer Lilian Darmono expresses it this way:

“The skin colour is perhaps a visible marker of difference in human race, under which there are all the invisible factors that differentiate us from one another: upbringing, traditions, customs, cultural practices, ideologies, religions, income and spending pattern, the list can go on.” (Darmono, 2000)

The difficulty with Benetton's approach is denying the significance of these invisible factors just as the visible ones, through such a superficial treatment. In fact, one of these invisible aspects Darmono identifies plays in reality *the* major role in every kind of marketing: the question of income. Advertisers have to sell to the 'haves'; the 'have-nots' cannot participate in the market. This, as we have to realize, is the *actual* context in which we need to examine diversity marketing.

In general, when considering the ethical implications of cross-cultural representation we must always recognize the power of context. In the case of diversity marketing though, this context is not only part of the message; *context is the message*.

"Marketing demands no other action than purchasing", Rock reminds us. A sad fact in the world we're living in is that "class difference signified by product consumption is often a code for racial or cultural difference". (Rock, 1993) This is to say, that if you are from a different income/wealth group chances are that you are from a different ethnic/cultural group too. (We will encounter this clear correlation within marketing logic also in the following case-study of Mexican Advertising, where we will discuss it further.)

This "invisible" issue of class is especially important as the marketed product – the Benetton sweater, the Philips television, or the pack of Marlboros – is in itself a class signifier.

"So here's the problem. While proposing to question racial classifications in an entertaining way, multicultural marketing can actually reinscribe those differences and offer solutions only through a sameness identified with product use; the product becomes the frame of reference, the emblem that serves to mollify the discomfort of real difference." (Rock, 1993)

Following this logic the only thing that actually does unite us across cultures is the act of purchasing the advertised product. Within marketing, this is called a *horizontal strategy*. Accordingly, "[u]nderlying all these messages is the construction of sameness that mirrors the corporate need: we are all the same in our desire for Marlboros or Pepsi." (Rock, 1993)

Regarded from this business point of view, many forms of diversity marketing seem like a mere response of multinationals against accusations that they are in fact selling sameness. From this perspective corporations like Coca-Cola, Benetton, Philips or Calvin Klein, who apply diversity marketing, appear to promise a multicultural experience for what is often a predominantly white, middle-class, Euro-American audience. For hooks such marketing strategies have a straight-forward motivation:

“The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”

(hooks in Rock, 1993)

In this sense, concluding this examination of diversity marketing, we ought to consider the following statement by Michael Rock:

“The multicultural images of racial harmony prevalent these days may seem kaleidoscopic, but a close inspection reveals their true color: bright white.”

(Rock, 1993)

If examined from such critical positions we find it difficult to regard diversity marketing as the innocent, noble and humanistic endeavour it tries to appear as. Summarizing this discussion, it is important to realize the complexity involved in those issues related to cross-cultural consumption. Furthermore, it seems that there cannot be such simple solutions in this context as is often proposed by diversity marketing strategies – and we therefore need to keep asking critical questions.

### 3. SELLING TO THE “OTHER”

#### a. GLOBAL MARKETING AND HOMOGENISATION

At this point let us concentrate this discussion on examining the representational strategies applied in global marketing of Western goods. As related to our prior reflections on homogenization, a major critique of global marketing is that, by

selling the same goods in essentially the same way all over the world, transnational corporations ignore and eradicate cultural difference.

In 1983, when global reach was still a fantasy for most corporations, Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt published the essay “The Globalization of Markets,” which became the manifesto of global marketing. There he proclaimed that “[t]he world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized“ and proposed global corporations to market their products “as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single entity” – selling the same things in the same way everywhere. According to his prognosis, “[a]ncient differences in national tastes or modes of doing business disappear.” (Levitt in Klein, 2000)

This attitude of forcing the world to speak your language and absorb your culture is still the marketing strategy of many global corporations. The director of an international advertising agency puts it this way:

“A lie has been perpetuated for years and years... The lie is that people are different. Yes there are differences among cultures, but a headache is a headache.“ And aspirin is aspirin. (B. + C. in Classen and Howes, 2000)

As Classen and Howes point out,

“[t]he rationale expressed here is that people are basically the same (or have the same headaches) everywhere, and that products designed to satisfy North American ‘needs’ will also satisfy the ‘needs’ of people in Bolivia or China. To take this rational further, there is nothing *inherently* American about McDonald’s restaurants or Hollywood movies, they are just good responses to what are fundamentally universal desires for food and entertainment.”  
(Classen and Howes, 2000)

There are also more subtle attitudes, even though producing similar effects. One holds that, yes, cultural differences exist, but the power (symbolic, technological, aesthetic, etc.) of Western products is so great that it can overcome any local differences. (As a Harvard business professor states: “the products and methods of the industrialized world play a single tune for all the world and all the world eagerly dances to it.”)

Another view states that, as foreign products, imported goods should not be expected to conform to local values. For example, “in an African society, such as that of the Ndembu of Zambia, the colors red and white might be strongly associated with blood and milk [...]. These colors would therefore seem inappropriate for marketing a soft drink. Yet a red and white Coca-Cola can might be deemed by members of the culture to stand so far outside tribal experience, that the colors are not interpreted according to the local system of classification, and instead assume a transcendent signification.”

In Japan, as an example, Western products often have better sales when advertised with Western models and in Western settings than with Japanese models in Japanese settings, where they may seem out of place and inappropriate.

According to these scenarios, there seems to be no need for Western marketers to take into account the cultural values of the non-Western peoples to whom they sell their products. Contrarily, there would even seem to be compelling reasons why marketers should *not* attempt to respond to these values as, in many cases, the commercial appeal of Western products has been shown to be based on their associations with a Western lifestyle.

However, imported products may sometimes be able to simply impose their own cultural logic on the markets they enter, but in many cases marketers have made quite a mistake when ignoring local sensibilities. One American advertising campaign for example which attempted to evoke a sense of masculinity by using an image of a deer became an object of ridicule in Brazil where the deer is a symbol of homosexuality. Similarly, a soap company which tried to promote its products in the Middle East with an ad depicting dirty clothes to the left of the detergent and clean clothes to the right achieved the opposite from the intended effect due to the fact that Arabic peoples read from right to left. (Classen and Howes, 2000)

At some point global corporations realized that they cannot simply ignore local sensibilities and started tailoring global products and advertisements to local markets, at least to a certain extent. Nevertheless, trying to present themselves as “cultural insiders” to their audience, marketers ought to make sure they “get things right”:

United Airlines, for example, advertised flights to Asia declaring “We Know the Orient”, but then mismatched pictures of Asian currencies and names of countries. (Classen and Howes, 2000)

In a similar way, a campaign by Benetton, which is presenting itself as culturally sensitive company striving to promote multiculturalism, had to be banned in Arab nations. It depicted three children of different races, smiling and sticking out their tongue – what turned out to be offensive for the Arab audience whose religion perceives the exposure of internal organs as pornographic.



Photograph by Oliviero Toscani. Source: Benetton.

Especially slogans and idiomatic expressions have the problem to translate poorly from English to other languages: my favorite is the example of a Taiwanese translation of the Pepsi-Cola slogan “Come Alive with the Pepsi Generation” which turned out to mean: “Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead.”

These incidents however seem harmless compared to the account of a colleague who had just come back from South Africa two years ago. Playstation was running an unbelievable billboard campaign for a shooting-game in Johannesburg with its sad



crime rate. The slogan was saying: “Johannesburg is the murder capital of the world. Let’s keep it this way.” In the end this controversial campaign had to be taken down.

These examples of insensitivity in cross-cultural design strikingly show the naivety with which marketers are approaching their audience. I suggest that as designers we do have a responsibility to show more respect towards other cultures within our work.

Nevertheless, it can also be argued if a change of representational practice does really make a difference to the globalization of consumer culture? Or could it just be an *illusion* of cultural difference that is preserved (or created)? This is of course the other side of this discourse, and this issue is very complex indeed. As we have observed in the discussion of diversity marketing, corporate representational strategies which create an illusion of cultural diversity and racial harmony while in actuality contributing to a homogenization of culture and global inequalities through their business practices, need to be handled with care. Furthermore, they tend to be rather naïve depictions of a desire for difference within the dominant particular and support an attitude of closing the eyes in front of the world’s problems. Contrarily, representational strategies which quite openly reveal real economical power distributions by simply repeating images of white upper-/ middle-class fantasies all over the world – may it be Singapore, Tokyo or Mexico City – are very problematic as well.

#### b. POWER OF REPRESENTATION

We need to realize that representations are powerful indeed. They have the ability to create realities in people’s heads, inflect desire, memories and fantasies. Remember the introduction in chapter II, which reminded us of the fact that “Communication Has A Consequence.” Images, which are at a very basic level of communication are much harder to reflect upon than written words for example, and they have the ability to penetrate deep into our consciousness. Obviously, the advertising industry has the most advanced knowledge of the power inherent in images and uses it in highly effective ways. We all have experienced that advertisements can be so enticing and emotionally involving that it is very hard to ignore them, even when having a critical attitude.

This just as some general reflection on the role of representation in form of images or advertising. The difficulty in this context arises when realizing how these highly effective mechanisms are used for establishing and re-enforcing hegemonic attitudes and manipulating people in order to passively accept such inequalities. On the other hand, this is of course nothing new and has been extensively used in political propaganda. Nevertheless, the difference as I see it is that advertising is generally regarded as something harmless, if annoying, and not considered as a political tool.

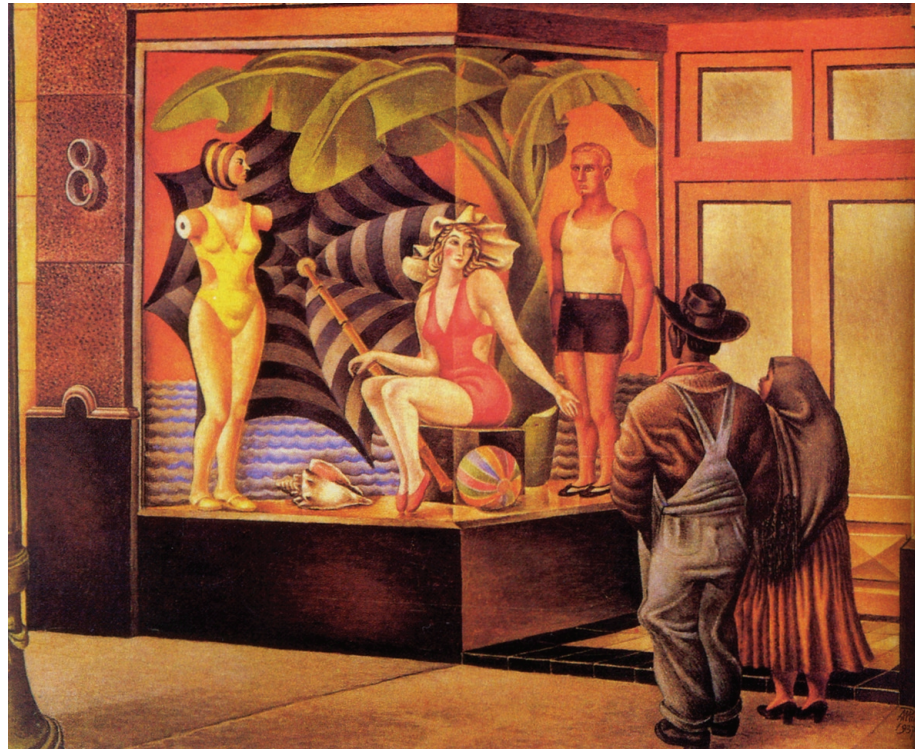
In this sense, I am convinced that representation [in our context] is highly powerful. It creates certain realities in people's minds. Michael Jackson is a sad example of the aspiration to whiteness promoted in Western popular culture. Neither is it by chance that the number of anorexia has increased so drastically among American or European women within the last decade since the "skeleton-look" has become prevalent in the fashion world. There are many examples of how the images and representations distributed in the media have actual consequences on people's lives.

In this mind-frame, let us focus now on Mexico and its advertising world as it appears in 2003. This study draws from an article by Daoud Sarhandi as a source, "Why does Mexican advertising look nothing like the Mexicans?", published in the British design magazine *Eye*.

### c. CASE STUDY: ADVERTISING IN MEXICO IN 2003

The problematics introduced in Global Marketing and Homogenization emerge disturbingly in Sarhandi's description of Mexican advertisement in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Leafing through magazines, glancing up any billboard, or switching on the television you will rarely, if ever, encounter any indigenous-looking faces. Magazines generally don't seem to feature celebrities or models without occidental features. – They are often produced in the United States or in Europe, but in many cases also locally – obviously without any interest to represent the country's real ethnic composition, or the appearance of their readers. Racially over-selective images in favour of the Occidental affect most aspects of visual communication in Mexico. (Sarhandi, 2003)

Antonio (“El Corcito”) Ruiz’s poignant painting *Verano* (“Summer”) from 1937 shows that the schism between consumer images and *indígenas* (indigenous people) is nothing new in Mexico – and neither the sense of alienation that accompanies this schism.



Verano, 1937. Painting by Antonio Ruiz. *Source:* Sarhandi, 2003.

*Courtesy:* Museo de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, Mexico City.

Photographs taken in Mexico by Daoud Sarhandi, 2002–2003.



In the frantic bustle of Mexico City and its 20 million or so inhabitants of highly varied appearance, mixed races and indigenous roots the gap between the real world and the polished world of the advertising industry reaches surreal proportions, according to Sarhandi (2003).

Critics argue that this

“separation between the real world and the marketing world is becoming more extreme and increasingly destructive” and may “even be contributing to a level of dissatisfaction – especially among the poorest people in Mexican society”. (Sarhandi, 2003)

Even more as influential Mexican writer and polemicist Carlos Monsiváis suggests that

“[s]eventy percent of the population is still ethnically Indian. [...] Ninety per cent is *mestizo*, but 70 per cent is Indian. Maybe one per cent of this country is unmixed – and that’s the super-elite –but there are no ‘Whites’ here; it’s a fantasy.”

According to Sarhandi however, in reality, a privileged class of Mexicans does exist, the members of which clearly see themselves as ‘White’.

Disturbingly it appears that “Mexican racism has become so ingrained in the culture, in ‘the way things are’, that it has become almost invisible.”

One of the country’s major social challenges is what the Population council – which surveys and advises on population-related issues around the world – reported only in 2000: “[Mexico] is a country marked by social, economic, ethnic and gender inequality. [...] The extremes of poverty and opulence are contrasts that are constantly present in daily life.” (Sarhandi, 2003)

With the minimum wage set at 45 pesos per day for a 48-hour week (about 3.3 euro), and with the poorest 65 per cent living on between less than one minimum salary and three minimum salaries, supermarkets and department stores have become the sole domain of the well-off. (Sarhandi, 2003)

Such poverty, as writer and social critic Paco Ignacio Taibo sees it, and the “heightened polarisation between the very rich and the struggling, has led advertising to become increasingly ‘aggressive’ in order to catch people – most of whom simply cannot be called ‘consumers,’ at least not in the sense that economically developed countries understand the word. This aggression is evident not only in the rigid, repetitive stereotypes, but in the size and volume of adverts too.” (Sarhandi, 2003)

This is possible as anyone can construct a billboard of any size on top of their building and then rent it out to the advertising agencies; regulations about public advertising and billboards are non-existent in Mexico. (Sarhandi, 2003)

Another social problematic which the advertising industry is shamefully responding to is a deep-rooted preoccupation with skin colour and ethnic background in Mexico. “Without money in this society, your colour is your outstanding feature,” Monsiváis states.

A typical “caste painting” of the late seventeenth century disturbingly reveals an obsession to classify the population according to skin colours and race in “Nueva España” of colonial times. Indigenous people are reduced to the lowest class while the Spanish colonial rulers designated white skin-colour as “aspirational.” The insulting names for children who are racial mixtures with darker skin than their parents’, i.e. “jump back”, “wolf” or “mule”, sadly illustrate this logic.

“Caste painting.”

Courtesy: Museo del Virreinato, Mexico City.

Source: Sarhandi, 2003.



Such a history of representation can under no circumstances be neglected, and it is even more shocking to realize the criminal discrimination with which the advertising industry continues today where the colonial oppression has ended. “Nearly two hundred years after Independence and 80 years after the end of the Revolution, we still have no representation of Indian beauty here,” Monsiváis expresses. On the contrary – “[c]lass and race are linked in the minds of most multinational executives and ad men. If dark or indigenous-looking people appear at all, they are often used to define and reinforce the status of the white ruling classes.” (Sarhandi, 2003) Consider advertisement for a product like milk, which is still a luxury article for most people in Mexico. According to Sarhandi, any products connected to health seem to be more reliant on images of blonde, white people than others. Furthermore, “[m]ilk ads are particularly susceptible to racial selection of this type, since they usually feature children, and brown children with Indian features are absent from most Mexican advertising.” (Sarhandi, 2003)

But what are the attitudes of designers and art-directors working in advertising in Mexico? – Sarhandi interviewed the vice-president of the local office of international

advertising agency BBDO, Carl Jones. He is a Welshman who grew up in Canada and moved to Mexico nine years ago, as one of the new breed of expatriate creative directors. He is also something of an exception to the rule, and he is fully aware of racism in Mexican advertising. When he first came to Mexico, he refused to help a well known multinational promote a skin-bleaching product they were attempting to launch on the market.

In 1997 Jones managed to produce a campaign using cultural icons that are usually associated with the street and working class, which is almost unique in Mexican advertising. Jones persuaded the client Alka Seitzer, the Mexican subsidiary of pharmaceutical giant Bayer, to take a risk with this campaign, as large multinationals normally avoid associating their products with anything along these lines. It paid off – Mexicans loved the campaign, and it won a series of awards and is still running. Anyhow, when it comes to getting more *morenos* into his ads, however, Jones admits he is fighting a losing battle. During his whole nine years in Mexico he can remember only *one* client, being himself *Moreno*, who actually insisted on putting darker-skinned people for his company's commercials. In an interview with Sarhandi he states:

“I’ve lived here long enough to know the language. They use the expression ‘Latino Internationale’ – ‘Latin American International’ – which means dark hair, dark eyes, and a light skin; and that’s Argentinian, or Mexican with predominantly Spanish blood. Either that or they fly models in from Europe or North America. What I do is I say I want more *morenos* in my castings, as well as the Argentinians, so that we get that mix. But when I show that to the client, at the end of the day they’ll sway more toward the lighter-skinned, ‘Latin American International’ look – which means white people. So the people in the ads can look ‘Latino’, but at the same time must be more ... er ... ‘Aspirational’.”

Sarhandi observes sharply:

“ ‘*Aspirational*’ is a word ad men everywhere use a lot, and Carl Jones is no exception. In racially and economically divided, developing countries like Mexico, ‘*aspirational*’ is a convenient euphemism for something much more unpleasant-sounding. In advertising, mixed with a combination of race and class stereotypes, it implies that there really is something ‘better’, ‘more



acceptable' and 'generally superior' about being white. Aspirationalism robs those who are least able to defend themselves of their most important asset: their cultural and social legitimacy. It lowers self-esteem among those at the economic bottom, and in doing so helps keep the lid on *real* aspirations, inhibiting real social mobility." (Sarhandi, 2003)

In the morally obscure world of Mexican marketing industry, aspirationalism – as defined by Carl Jones – goes like this:

"Because the people with money are usually light-skinned, the association is that if you have light skin then you have money. And in advertising people want to aspire to the upper classes, so that's why in commercials you'll be showing lighter-skinned people, because you're showing a lifestyle that's aspirational; [..]" (Sarhandi, 2003)

Aspirationalism is a hard-sell strategy, and it does not come much harder, or more objectionable, than in Mexico.

Publicidad Ferrer is a highly respected advertising agency founded nearly half a century ago. Juan Cristóbal Ferrer and his Vice President, Creative Director Enrique Staines Cicero, are proud of their company's Mexican-ness. Also they are utterly sick of the imposition, on Mexico, of US and European cultural stereotypes. "At Publicidad Ferrer it's a daily fight to try to make advertising more faithful to our Mexican way of life," says Ferrer. "Meanwhile, the big companies are fighting to make their products more 'global'."

This is of course clearly related to marketing strategies of global corporations discussed above. Historically, after the end of the World War II Mexico developed rapidly when large US manufacturing and automobile corporations moved into the country in strength. Along they brought their own advertising agencies which in turn imported their tried-and-tested creative ideas and marketing strategies. So strictly according to Levitt's imperialistic theories, on different soil they simply carried on doing what they had always done – right down to the same preference for occidental faces and American cultural stereotypes. Even today, states Ferrer,

“the way they do advertising is exactly the same. [...] They do not understand, or they do not want to see, that the Mexican population is completely different – with another way of living, and thinking, and feeling. They are not willing to adapt the message of their ads to our culture.”

Paco Ignacio Taibo sharply condemns Mexican advertising industry as well as the political system which ideologically supports their prejudicial behaviour:

“Advertisers produce these racist images because that’s the image they have of this society; that’s the mirror in which they see themselves. [...] [A]ll these guys would actually like to live in an ugly city like Indianapolis, or Austin Texas – or Kansas City, which is even worse! That’s the city they would like to see here; that’s the city of their dreams. And so when they get into advertising they produce this nowhere-land, Alice in Wonderland, white, slimy middle-class world.”

This of course raises a variety of questions about the whole concept of the “American dream” as related to marketing. In many cases we can find this “American dream” strongly present in today’s media landscape – may it be advertising, soap operas or Hollywood movies – as it is obviously a central part of American culture. But in the face of cultural hegemony and tendencies towards homogenization there are certain questions we need to ask. Let’s at this point zoom back for a moment and contemplate the bigger picture of where we are going.

*Can American suburbia work as a dream for the whole world?* Generally speaking, this seems to be the “aspirational” lifestyle which is sold so enticingly in global marketing. It appears to work very successfully at the moment, right? But *what if the whole world starts dreaming this one dream?* Only a very small minority though would be able to live according to it, in reality. Imagine, for example, that everybody on this planet would aspire to own two cars. Already today the United States need to go through “much trouble” in order to realize their dream. Are you aware that currently the United States alone are consuming around *one quarter* of the world’s natural resources? From an environmental perspective it is obviously not a possibility that everybody in this world would live according to this lifestyle. Think only about waste, as another

example. And there are numerous social and logistical limitations that clearly make it impossible that the whole world could live according to this dream.<sup>11</sup>

However, let us return to the original question: What if the whole world would be dreaming this one dream? – While everybody would be dreaming it, the vast majority on this planet could never even be close to living it. What would be the social and political implications and consequences of this? – No, this dream that the Western consumer society is teaching us with every step we take does not seem to be taking us very far when considered from a perspective of equal human rights. However, the purpose of this discussion is to reveal the ways in which people all over the world are *taught* a certain world-view, and it could be claimed that a major one is through representational practices. How do we say? – *An image speaks more than a thousand words.*

So let us now zoom in again and return our focus to the case of Mexican advertising and some very relevant positions in the context of what we just reflected on.

Enrique Staines brings it to the point: In the end, as he told Sarhandi, it all comes down to a matter of *choice* – or rather the lack of choice, both historically and now.

“When the Spanish came, the population in this country could not choose [...] and that lack of choice is still reverberating through the society today. The opportunity to study, to raise a family, with their own house, and their own car – they simply do not have the choice. And, in the same way, they do not have the choice to influence the advertising they see, because nobody asks them whether they like it or not. And in the history of this country I don’t think there has been one government that has wanted to change this overall situation – because that lack of choice is how they control the population.”

(Sarhandi, 2003)

This emphasis on the question of choice as an essential value is an issue we will return to further below. Nonetheless, marketing people seem to have a very different position in this issue: Even Jones who, as he sees it, has strong views on corporate interference in social mores becomes defensive at the idea of putting more pressure

on the corporate clients: “It’s not our job to make moral judgment. This is a business. Advertising reflects the society. It doesn’t influence, it reflects.” (Sarhandi, 2003)

Personally, I find this argument ludicrous, and I don’t assume that advertisers believe this themselves. Let’s express it like this: If it wouldn’t influence, it wouldn’t be a business – right? Why else would companies spend massive budgets on advertising? Because they kindly want to reflect society? – *The whole point* of advertising is obviously to influence ( – if not manipulate).

Also Staines profoundly disagrees with this statement, reminding us that this kind of discriminatory representation indeed has consequences.

“We have to study what kind of impact this [racist] advertising is having, and what kind of hate is growing from it. Because this type of advertising is generating hate – and that, for tomorrow, is a big social problem.”

(Sarhandi, 2003)

Oscar Medraza, a former child model himself, founded Contempo Models fourteen years ago. It is Mexico’s busiest agency, with around 500 girls from all over Latin America. Asked about problematics in discriminatory representation in Mexican advertising Madraza told Sarhandi: “Look at Asian people. They’re always gonna look ‘Asian’, right? But they just wanna look more American or European. It’s like a Revolution! They change their hair; they wear extravagant clothes; they use make-up. They use a lot of things to look different. Black people too. They straighten their hair. Michael Jackson dyes his skin. You know what I mean? People just wanna feel comfortable with themselves anywhere in the world. And that’s ‘Aspiration’. If you don’t have aspirations in life,” he concluded, “what do you have? Right?”

(Sarhandi, 2003)

When it comes to the question of responsibility advertisers are versatile in justifying the images they create. Curiously, they always seem to take credit for the profits their ads generate, or the awards they receive. But when it comes to the chauvinistic elements in their work, they are quick to shift the responsibility on to others. Those are the fault

of their bigoted and narrow-minded clients – they themselves would love to be more inclusive but their dictatorial clients just won't let them! They speak as if they would have no choice about what they do.

As this case study on Advertising in Mexico dramatically shows, representation is a crucial issue. When internalized, *representations are at the core of identity production* and have profound impact on people. Current practices of cross-cultural or cross-racial representation are in many cases highly problematic as such images when constantly re-enforced can make people torture themselves in order to realize the self-image *branded* into their mind. In Japan, for example the leading plastic surgery procedure is enlarging noses so they appear more Western. Removing a fold of skin from the eyes for a more "Caucasian look" ranks second. The systematics of oppression discussed above are very obvious indeed, if you just bother to look.

#### d. THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER: STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

*What will we do with such knowledge?* Is there anything we can do as designers, if we feel this is not the way things are supposed to be? Let us consequently attempt to outline some strategies we could apply for confronting the problematics we have discussed.

Generally I tend to assume that – except in extreme cases such as marketing methods we have observed in Mexico – designers are often creating insensitive or discriminatory representations because of either ignorance on cultural issues, or a certain ethnocentric arrogance, but not in a sense of malice. Design education hardly ever involves training in social sciences and designers practicing in studios or advertising agencies are therefore often unaware of certain socio-cultural problematics related to their work. Furthermore, with design being such a practice-oriented discipline, designers are often not used to reflecting on their practice through critical theories, especially as current design literature has, as I have outlined before, massive short-comings in critical discussions of media theory and cultural studies. However, ignorance obviously does not exclude us from the consequences of our actions – on

the other hand, it is probably one of the worst excuses to have. Clearly, the current situation of discriminatory cross-cultural representational practices is in no way sustainable as it manifests global injustices. Hence, this work attempts to be a small step towards creating more awareness.

Discussing the issues presented within the last section, the fact that disturbs me most is that they are simply not talked about – *a luxury they do not deserve*.

Peggy McIntosh powerfully argues in her essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”:

“To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. *The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects [...].*” (McIntosh, 1989. Emphasis mine.)

Therefore, a significant first step in facing these issues is that the problematics inherent in cross-cultural representation *need to be talked about*. Discuss this with your friends, your colleagues, your superior, your teachers, your students. Chances are that they might be involved in an intercultural project one day. I propose to you to give a first impulse within your own community – and do it today.

Secondly, as socially aware and responsible designers we must start taking initiative within our practice. Certainly we need to approach intercultural design projects reflectively, asking ourselves critical questions, such as:

- + *Which values are communicated and promoted here?*
- + *Is there a message?*
- + *Are the images used really promoting this message, or is there a hidden agenda?*

Furthermore, one issue which could be considered essential in everyday practice of representation is the *question of choice*. Do consumers have a choice which billboard they will see posted on the town square? – Probably not in the same way that designers working on such projects have an influence on what it will contain and in which form. Do people from cultural or racial minorities have the choice of how they want to represent themselves within mainstream culture? – Often not, while designers

might be involved in certain decisions concerning these representations. So, if given the opportunity: why don't we simply ask people *how they would like to represent themselves?* As simple as that. Why wouldn't we?

In addition there are many other ways towards establishing a more responsible and critical practice, which will result naturally from an increased awareness. Even if our influence might have certain limits within a corporate context – we are still important members in a chain. Of course as designers, as in every other profession, it is not always easy to have moral standards and act accordingly. We might say things others don't want to hear. We might even risk our job. Either way, the problem is that *in reality we cannot avoid making such ethical choices: By ignoring them we make them anyway.*

#### 4. REPRESENTATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

The last section has asked us to expand our perspective in order to look at the wider global context in which design operates. This could be considered essential, as we have seen that intercultural design is interrelated with its social, economical and political environment in complex ways. Therefore, considering these relationships and extending our understanding of intercultural design beyond mere technical design issues in order to create a deeper understanding of invisible connections will enable us to make informed and responsible choices within our practice. In this sense it could be argued that one of the main task of designers in a global world is to broaden their horizons towards a variety of disciplines, understanding that design never works in a vacuum but always within certain socio-cultural contexts, which are also political – whether we like it or not. Our profession has certainly a powerful role as creator of culture, and as it does not operate solely within the realm of individual creative expression like art, we need to assume responsibility for its impact on the global community and our audience on a wider level of society.

Hence, let us now reflect on the ethical implications which arise in my opinion from the discussions in the last section and I have consequently been claiming that we do have responsibility, as designers and as human beings.

Why, you may ask, why should designers with “Western” background have such a responsibility? Is it our fault that multinational corporations establish dominance? Are “Western designers” to blame that other cultures are now mimicking the West? Or are we responsible for atrocities which former generations have committed to other cultures as part of the colonial rule?

These questions are for everybody to answer for themselves, and I am not suggesting any of it in this context. These are not the reasons why I insist that, yes, as designers with Western background we do have special responsibility towards other cultures.

The reason is that you and me, *we are every day taking full advantage from these very structures of inequality*. None of us being raised in the West has personally accomplished anything in order to earn this privilege. We have the luxury of simply taking it for granted. I did not have to do anything to be born in Austria instead of Ethiopia, or Haiti. As I see it, this was a mere stroke of chance – and nevertheless it profoundly shaped my outlook in life. It gave me massive privileges of choice – starting from my passport, healthcare, education and what-not. However, I do not believe that I am in any way more (or less) worthy to deserve these qualities than anybody else. *Think about it from this perspective.*<sup>12</sup>

The structures we discussed within this chapter serve to manifest *undeserved advantage*. I insist that this privilege which we are taking full benefit of on a daily basis does give us a responsibility indeed, towards other people who are *excluded from it even though they deserve it in exactly the same way*. Such strength cannot afford arrogance but asks for deep humbleness. This is one underlying and unsaid context Western designers are operating in when engaging in cross-cultural representation.

The main socio-political challenge for the West in the twenty-first century is to open up for a honest and respectful encounter with the world. This is what intercultural communication and intercultural design can prepare us for. Subsequently we need to learn sharing, and giving as much as we take. With exploitation, stealing other nations' resources and then leaving them behind, the West has too long already been feeding a monster, which is about to swallow it in return. The way to the future will lead through *breaking down fences and building bridges*.



Within this section on *Representation and Ethics in Cross-Cultural Consumption* we have explored cross-cultural representation in the context of international consumption from various perspectives, drawing from critical theories within media studies and cultural theory. In this context we have looked at consumption of Western goods by non-Western peoples and potential consequences on cultural diversity through homogenization, as related to our discussions in chapter one. Secondly, we critically considered the consumption of non-Western goods by the West, including commodification of “otherness” through methods such as exoticisation or aesthetisation, as well as examined problematics in strategies of diversity marketing. We thirdly outlined ethically questionable practices in the global marketing of Western goods, drawing attention to the power inherent in representation, as concisely illustrated by a case study of highly problematic strategies in Mexican advertising today. Concluding this section we raised questions and strategies for designers in order to avoid such insensitivity in representation and contribute to creating a more respectful and responsible practice of intercultural design.

Hence, this section aims to clearly illustrate to designers the power inherent in design and representational practice, promoting ethic-oriented behaviour among visual designers. Bringing up critical issues within current international design practices such as racism and imperialistic attitudes also served to direct our attention towards these “invisible” dimensions, attempting to *start a dialogue within the design community on how the profession can respond responsibly to these problematics*. Furthermore, including these discussions also responds to the profound lack design literature shows in featuring such critical theories within its discourse, instead reducing intercultural design to its technical or formal aspects – denying its political dimensions and the role of power.

In summary, throughout this chapter on *Intercultural Design* we have explored issues for designer to consider and be aware of when designing across cultures. In this context we have questioned and examined the role of the designer within the intercultural design process, before we familiarized ourselves with currently employed and functional international visual language in the form of signage systems, referring to Graphic Design literature. We then outlined specific issues to consider in intercultural

interface design as discussed in the discourse of Human Computer Interaction. Subsequently we introduced critical discussions of cross-cultural representation in commodity culture, which have profound presence in social sciences such as Cultural Theory and Media Studies, but are notably absent from the design discourse.

Drawing from a variety of fields this chapter aims to provide a multidisciplinary approach giving insights to various aspects which might play a role in intercultural design. In this sense, it served to point out that intercultural design is interrelated to its social, cultural, economical and political environment in complex ways and therefore designers are asked to broaden their horizons in order to understand their own role in this context. Providing visual examples of current design practices in an international environment provided additional insights in exploring and criticizing current techniques, raising questions on strategies towards a culturally sensitive and diverse design practice.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newscenter.philips.com/InformationCenter/NewsCenter/FArticleDetail.asp?lArticleId=3174&lNodeId=649> (March 9, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> COELHO, PAULO. *The Alchemist*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999: 72.

<sup>3</sup> INGEN-HOUSZ, TIMOTHEE. "Elephant's Memory: An interactive visual language." <http://www.khm.de/~timot> (February 8, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> In LUPTON AND MILLER, 1996. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>5</sup> See the website at Issue 36: <http://www.benetton.com/colors> (March 9, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.homeindia.com> (January 25, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> I am naturally aware that cross-cultural consumption not only concerns representation between different world cultures and the West, but operates similarly within the West itself, i.e. Spain being marketed as exotic in Germany, Australia in the UK or Lapland in Finland. Nevertheless this chapter will mostly focus on the cross-cultural constellation of the "West" and the "other", as I am concerned with highlighting unequal terms in which such cultural flows tend to take place.

<sup>8</sup> GIBSON, CARRIE. "So hip it hurts." *The Guardian*, October 23, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> "Guide to Luxury Living in Today's Africa": <http://www.diesel.com/successfullivingguides> (February 16, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> "Taking Action" á la Diesel: <http://www.diesel.com/successfullivingguides> (February 16, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> See also the visionary work of Italian strategic designer Ezio Manzini on Designing for Sustainability: <http://www.edf.edu.au/Resources/Manzini/ManziniMenuMain.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Please excuse my undifferentiated use of "West" and "Western" at this point. I do not feel comfortable with these generalized statements, yet I am lacking a better expression to explain my point. Generally I am addressing "Western designers" as those included in the privilege I am describing here. Nevertheless, it is not always so clear who would be regarded as "Western designer" in this context.

## IV. CONCLUSION: DESIGNING FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Reaching now the last stage of our journey, reflecting on the sights and experiences along the way, we are consequently proposing that appropriate and successful design across cultures is also design that acknowledges respect for cultural diversity.

Throughout the last section on issues of cross-cultural representation we have considered a variety of examples of culturally insensitive design, or design which while pretending to promote certain messages in fact also contained a hidden agenda. Hence, I would like to present at this point also two design examples which are from my perspective outstanding in their efforts to celebrate cultural diversity.

The first can be regarded an outstanding positive example as related to our prior case study on Mexican advertising: The award-winning television identity for *Canal Once* developed by one of Mexico's leading graphic designers Gabriela Rodriguez aiming to create a series of images of "real" Mexican people drawn from all sections of society and all occupations. For Rodriguez it was important to show people's inner beauty and strength, and to portray them in the setting of their daily lives. (Sarhandi, 2003)



Television identity concept for Canal Once, Gabriela Rodriguez, 2002.

Source: Sarhandi, 2003.

A second example that I regard as internationally unique is the culturally sensitive and well-developed billboard-campaign of HSBC, Hongkong Shanghai Banking Corporation, that deserves respect for the way it presents cultural diversity as a precious good to be cherished and worthwhile to be studied deeper. It is obvious that this campaign has been well-researched presenting dimensions of diversity in culture and traditions in subtle, educating and humorous ways, avoiding shallow stereotypes.

**USA**  
Dancing shoes

**UK**  
Dancing shoes

**SOUTH AFRICA**  
Dancing shoes

Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.

Choosing the footwear to fit the occasion comes as second nature when you're a local.

At HSBC, we have banks in more countries than anyone else. And each one is staffed by local people.

We have offices in 79 countries and territories: Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa. Being local enables them to offer insights into financial opportunities and create service initiatives that would never occur to an outsider. It means our customers get the kind of local knowledge and personal service that you'd expect of a local bank.

And a level of global knowledge and widely sourced expertise that you wouldn't.

**HSBC**  
The world's local bank

**CHINA**  
Noodles

**THAILAND**  
Noodles

**JAPAN**  
Noodles

Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.

Wheat, rice, bean or seaweed noodles? A local will know exactly which his favorites are.

At HSBC, we have banks in more countries than anyone else. And each one is staffed by local people.

We have offices in 79 countries and territories: Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa. Being local enables them to offer insights into financial opportunities and create service initiatives that would never occur to an outsider. It means our customers get the kind of local knowledge and personal service that you'd expect of a local bank.

And a level of global knowledge and widely sourced expertise that you wouldn't.

**HSBC**  
The world's local bank

**INDIA**  
Married

**CANADA**  
Married

Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.

Where a wedding ring goes is just something you grow up knowing when you're a local.

At HSBC, we have banks in more countries than anyone else. And each one is staffed by local people.

We have offices in 79 countries and territories: Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa. Being local enables them to offer insights into financial opportunities and create service initiatives that would never occur to an outsider. It means our customers get the kind of local knowledge and personal service that you'd expect of a local bank.

And a level of global knowledge and widely sourced expertise that you wouldn't.

**HSBC**  
The world's local bank

**UK**  
Gift to a newborn

**CHINA**  
Gift to a newborn

**TURKEY**  
Gift to a newborn

Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge.

Knowing the traditional gift for a new arrival is something that comes from being a local.

At HSBC, we have banks in more countries than anyone else. And each one is staffed by local people.

We have offices in 79 countries and territories: Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa. Being local enables them to offer insights into financial opportunities and create service initiatives that would never occur to an outsider. It means our customers get the kind of local knowledge and personal service that you'd expect of a local bank.

And a level of global knowledge and widely sourced expertise that you wouldn't.

**HSBC**  
The world's local bank

HSBC billboard campaign: "Never underestimate the importance of local knowledge." Courtesy: HSBC

We are now about to arrive at the end of our journey, so let us take this moment to reflect on our experiences along the way. Embarking on this journey we have first navigated through turbulent seas of socio-cultural changes where we have seen the dynamic interrelations of the field of design with its cultural environment. Additionally we used this travel to explore the exchange of global cultural flows which appeared to have strong currents in one direction, not streaming under equal conditions. Design and media could therefore, as it has been proposed, make use of their powerful role as creator of culture in order to shape a fruitful environment for representing cultural diversity, in order to improve access and inclusiveness of digital media. UNESCO's Culture Sector identifies in this context: "Cultural industries—particularly the audiovisual and multimedia ones—are [...] a key vector for promoting cultural diversity at local and international levels." (UNESCO Culture Sector, 2004) Applying our insights during this first part of our journey, having allowed us to expand our horizons and look at the broader context of our field, can therefore inspire us to move towards this direction of celebrating cultural diversity.

Continuing our journey we have then crossed the plains of Intercultural Communication where we explored closer the concept of culture and its various aspects as related to communication across cultures. Contemplating on culturally diverse perceptions of reality we gained insights on the complexity of deep structures of culture which profoundly influence our position in intercultural encounters.

Moving on, we began to climb the mountains of Intercultural Design, which presented us with diverse perspectives and outlooks for the practice of design. Exploring the role of the designer in the intercultural design process allowed us to create the self-reflexive stance necessary on our way. Taking a look at systems of international visual language and issues in interface design opened consequently insights on intercultural design practice. Ascending on steeper paths we continued our way with critical considerations on representation and ethics in cross-cultural consumption, shedding light on questionable practices in intercultural design and marketing today. During these explorations we were able to increase our awareness on the significance of ethical behaviour when engaging in cross-cultural representation highlighting the power inherent in representation through defining realities and creating images in people's minds. These discussions have helped to highlight the potential complexities

involved in intercultural design and therefore, emphasized the need for the designer to move within this realm with increased sensitivity and careful reflection.

Having now reached the peak where we can enjoy a wider view, breathing fresh air, we can use this moment to consider what we could learn from the experiences of this journey.

First of all, as I hope, this journey has raised our attention to intercultural design as well as intercultural communication being *significant* issues in the world we are living in today, worthwhile to study deeper and improve our knowledge in. Furthermore, it has appealed to designers to extend their horizons considering the knowledge of various related fields through a *multidisciplinary* approach. Understanding our role as part of a larger whole, designers therefore ought to *act responsibly* in the sensitive environment of intercultural design, and with careful consideration. Having reached the end of this journey, we have also achieved an awareness that there remains still much work to be done and many roads to be travelled in order to create a more reflective and responsible practice. One first step will be to include critical discussions on intercultural design and representation into the design discourse in order to educate designers on these issues, enabling them to make more informed choices within their practice.

In consequence, this journey also hopes to have given insights to designers on their important role in affirming an environment of “respect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding” that are, as identified in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, “among the best guarantees of international peace and security.”

In this sense, Robert L. Peters, past president of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations *Icograda*, acknowledges the power of design:

“Design shapes culture. Designers, more than most others, are in a position to celebrate societal differences, to embrace the vernacular and to help avoid the unhappy melding of unique cultures into a bland global stew. In the face of monolithic pressures to conform, designers can become champions of

the unique things that dignify human beings and that make our civilisations different.”

ROBERT L. PETERS, March 2002.

Designers and visual communicators can therefore play a powerful part in promoting the value of cultural diversity, being even more significant today, as well as in celebrating this world’s diversity as the greatest richness of humankind.

Concluding with these reflections, I thank you for joining me on the adventures and explorations of this journey and hope that it has given you insights as well as inspirations for planning your own routes and bringing other peoples along to discover the landscapes of design across cultures.



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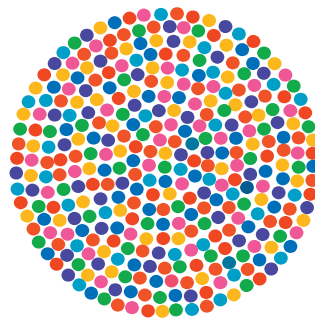
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