

# On Digital 'Third Worlds'

An interview with Christian Hoeller, *Springer Magazine*

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**Springer:** In your contribution to the big Cyberconference in Madrid you made a quite strong and compelling point about the "New World Other" of cyberspace. The argument in brief is that the glorious promises of cyberspace do not apply to large sections of the world population, especially in Africa. What do these "new world borders" exactly look like and where particularly are they felt most strongly? Do they really coincide with the old borders between First and Third Worlds?

**Oguibe:** I think your question may be answered from the back. The borders amplified by the cartography of cyberspace are not exactly new; they are the old borders of class and disposition long identified by numerous schools of sociopolitical thought, cutting across national and political boundaries and thus specificatory of a different geography. The 'third world' of cybertechnology and cybertheory, what has been referred to as the 'digital third world', is a global territory that runs through what I consider the virtual—that is to say, simulacral—borders of the present first/third categories, ultimately exposing the ludicrousness of these delineations. In other words there are, in truth, no first and third worlds along lines of physical geography; these categories are rather socioeconomic, and it is these homogeographical borders that are replicated in the politics and cartography of cyberspace.

In Madrid, Gomez-Pena repeated an old but most pertinent call to discard the old, deceptive categories of so-called first and third worlds. What he meant, I believe, is not to ignore the chasms or dismiss the categories, but to redefine them; to recognize that the third world is not Africa or Latin America or Portugal, for that matter, but those as well as the very belly of America and England and the rest of Europe. The point is to recognize that the real 'third world'—and that's a term I consider somewhat inappropriate and misleading—is a global zone that comprizes the deprived neighborhoods of the United States from California through Chicago to New York as it does Madras and Chad. Given, the dichotomies between the highly- and the less industrialized worlds are of enormous and quite decisive relevance in many respects; yet the specific factors that define individual lives are not determined entirely by those dichotomies.

Surprise some as it may, there are individuals who own fleets of private jets in Nigeria as there are those who have access to the most advanced, available digital hardware in Aracataca. For a period in the early nineties, an appreciable percentage of my generation in Nigeria was made up of merchant bankers who relied on global cellular communication for their business transactions. This is the point I make: namely that access to advanced technology may be affected—but is not necessarily determined—by the specifics of geographical location. The 'other' is not out there; the 'Other' is the brother. In the specific case of cyberspace this other is not just the young man in Liberia who for reasons of war is already in his late teens and has had no appreciable education; the other is, also, the student at the University of Illinois at Chicago who is unable to take advantage of the technology at his disposal because an upbringing of deprivation in the villages of the American midwest has left him with a serious ailment of technophobia. He is the fellow at the neighborhood bodega in New York who knows the computer only as a word. These are not an alien people deserving of expatriate compassion. These are the intimate 'others' of our discourse, the others that cyberist rhetoric ignores.

Some would, of course, that we moved on rather than spent much time flogging this question, and they must have a point, too, difficult as it is for me to find that point. Yet, there it brings no harm that we dealt with one of the most crucial shortcomings of a facility with such obvious potentials and for which so much more has already been claimed.

**One of your demands is the extension of cyber-technology and facilities to the "forsaken geographies". What are your expectations for bringing the internet to the "underdeveloped" parts of Africa? In other words, will the extension of cyberspace help meet the demands of the real, starving world there? If yes, through which means will this be effected?**

Regarding the extension of connectivity, if you take my answer to the last question into count, you'd find that my argument is that rural Africa is no greater priority, perhaps, than urban Chicago. In reverse it is my argument, also, that the wild claims made for connectivity and cyberspace with regard to their supposed ability to transform existence and reality; the idea of cyberspace as panacea, are preposterous, even ludicrous, and particularly so within certain contexts and polities. For some locations, instant connectivity is not only impracticable, but largely irrelevant in the present, also, and it would be a significant error to take my call for a desire to present the internet to societies torn by war or caught in famine, be they in Liberia or Croatia, though it is my conviction that such societies must hasten to sort their difficulties out so they can be there with the rest and take advantage of whatever this phenomenon has to offer.

Every society has its priorities, obviously. This does not in any way remove the fact that there are positive, practical ways in which the internet can be of use to the dispossessed or societies in distress. The fundamental essence of cyberspace, after all, is as informa-

tion technology, and efficacious transmission of information and knowledge is crucial to the survival and progress of all societies. Already research into cheaper, more practicable forms of connective technology appropriate for the peculiar circumstances of such societies is going on—by which I do not mean crude or putative technology—and if the information technology community had the will, we could soon place such facilities at the disposal of those societies where fibre-optic or other forms of connective infrastructure are currently not feasible.

**Don't you see the danger that a mere quantitative extension of cyberspace will be just another act of (economic) colonoziation by the West, especially when enacted by huge Western corporations? Aren't cyber-technologies the tools of some privileged, hegemonic few over an underprivileged majority - be it in South Africa or in the US? My query is whether cybertechnology will not automatically widen the gap between over- and underprivileged - just because it is a technology of power.**

There is a danger in every undertaking whether it is space exploration or the introduction of new technologies, and every technology is an instrument of power but this does not necessarily qualify it as evil. And no, I do not buy into the hysteria over technology as a tool of hegemony over a prostrate majority. The majority has as much responsibility to possess technology and the power attendant upon this, as anyone else. I made the point in Madrid that the triumph of the colonial project owed quite significantly to Europe's possession of fire power and advanced military technology, arguing that perhaps the ravenous details of this historical incident might have been mediated had there been an equal mastery of this technology on all sides. I use this only as an analogy, albeit one that I consider most relevant here.

To call attention to the absence of certain societies from cyberspace is not to absolve them of the responsibility to resolve and transcend whatever constraints might account for this absence in order to place themselves on a par with the rest. The answer is not to resign and continue to reside in some third locale. The challenge, I believe, is to invalidate present hierarchies by marching boldly and determinedly alongside the rest. Certain excuses are becoming rather facile, and it is only proper that each society addresses seriously, those factors and inadequacies that place it on a margin and at a disadvantage in relation to others.

**A question about cyber ideology: Isn't it a huge privilege of Western intellectuals to make all those liberal and libertarian claims about the destruction of all frontiers, an endless connectivity of the "World Spirit"? It rather occurs to me as an intellectual masquerade of an aggressively expansive and despotic capitalism. What do you think?**

Not exactly, no. The bogey of an expansive and despotic capitalism is itself, in some sense, an essentialist liberal creation. Ironically, the nature of cyberist claims reveals also, the deep political naivete of the intellectual class and its self-destructive proclivity to inadvertent complicity in the so-called free market project. I do not think it is a case of masquerading; but rather of inherent and deep insensitivity and self-centeredness. And this is not to dismiss the dangers of naive and irresponsible intellectism or what Christopher Norris has aptly referred to as 'uncritical theory', but to place it in context. It is the historical paradox of this class, after all, that the responsibility to articulate and champion both emergent despotism and its negation ultimately falls on it. You would notice that it is intellectuals, too, who are leading the rizing challenge to vain cyberism.

**Are the massive promises of cyberspace put forward by JP Barlow, Sandy Stone and the like worth pursuing anyway? If you think of the claims about multiple identities, the leaving behind of the body and gender boundaries, an endless connectivity and so on - which of these would you consider as serious and which as nonsense? Which of these ideological points could be most useful for the "wretched of the earth"?**

I think most of the claims are nonsensical, quite frankly, but that does not render them invalid. People must exercise the freedom to plumb their imaginations. What is insidious is not that sci-fi enthusiasts and frustrated intellectuals are finding a new outlet for their fantasies in cybertechnology, but that these are presented as the inevitable condition of our collective future. Now, that's both silly and dangerous; dangerous because it diverts attention from more serious and useful explorations into the potentials of this phenomenon.

**A point you also made in Madrid was that it is equally necessary to criticize power structures within the internet. So it seems as if there is not just a border between lucky and forsaken geographies but also one entirely within the net: between those with just more and better resources than others. Where exactly do you see this second frontier? A related point: How do you view the still-current racism, sexism, homophobia and so on among "netizens"?**

The question of borders within the net could be addressed from numerous angles since difference, dissension and demarcations occur at several levels. One such level is the case of power relations and distinctions between those who enjoy recognition on the net and those who are literally ignored for reasons of either being new on the net, being considered not nearly relevant, or indeed for reasons of their identity and geographical location. This is the question of visibility. In a recent study around Bourdieu and the question of power with relation to computer mediated communication Elizabeth Lane Lawley calls attention to the prominence and privileges enjoyed by those who possess a certain reputation or stature within the net by virtue of longevity, saviness, location at the forefronts of cyber discourse, or sheer, brutish self promotion. Lawley notes that those who have "a 'history' on the network" are placed "in positions of authority" and "both seniority and celebrity" are rewarded. [See Lawley, *The Sociology of Culture in Computer-Mediated Communication: An Initial Exploration*, p7] It is not mere irony that Sandy Stone refers to herself as the Goddess of Cyberspace: the truth is that she and people like her command enormous visibility on the net that is not enjoyed by too many others. Divine appellations may not be appropriate for such individuals, true, but certainly there are sacred cows of cyberspace.

Another manifestation of persistent borders is the replication of real-life bigotry and prejudices on the net. I must say that I find the use of the net for extremist nationalism somewhat less threatening than the perpetuation of subtle racism borne out of socialized ignorance and insensitivity.

In Madrid I made reference to what I consider my little misunderstanding with Yahoo and how this led to their very determined exclusion of my URL from their search engine. My version of this rather minor yet highly revealing incident begins with an e-mail that I sent off to Yahoo in November 1995 shortly after I was introduced to the net, in which I pointed out that their compilation of writers—a most admirable pioneering effort at the time, I dare say—failed most fatally for having no place whatsoever for writers of colour. Quite inadvertently, Yahoo was practically creating a racially exclusive literary canon on the net, and one felt one had a duty to remind them that it would serve no meaningful, positive purpose in this regard to keep the internet white, as it were. It would be useful that an Arawak or African American school child with access to the net is able to call up the index of American fiction and find the gamut of that literary tradition rather than merely Caucasian American writers. Obviously the reminder did not go down so well with the Yahoo, although to their credit their index did improve shortly after.

By recalling this in Madrid, my purpose was not to complain but to illustrate one manner in which the hierarchies of visibility, representation and privilege are transferred from real to cyberspace. A brief exploration of the net would very quickly reveal the manner in which sections of society with a history of erasure or violence of representation continue to fall victim to these in cyberspace, and how the things that have kept us apart in real life have resurfaced in that supposedly sanctified new territory of the connected.

Bigotry on the net should not come to us as a surprise when Black churches are being set on fire across America. It would be unrealistic to expect the net to be free of sexism and racial prejudice as long as it is occupied by real people and not Sandy Stone's virtual bodies. The challenge is that the forces of tolerance step in and utilize same facilities of connective access that bigots now seem quite astute at using to their own advantage.

**You claim that cyberspace can be the route to "interzonal", a realm beyond firm territorial frontiers? What exactly do you mean by interzonal? How is it related to what other postcolonial theorists call "Third Space"?**

There is little doubt that cyberspace and connectivity provide access across national boundaries, and skeptics are steadily converting to this conviction. For those who occupy the indeterminate territories of megapolitania, and those who are condemned to lives of expatriation and exile, there is little doubt that we are able on occasion to step into locations and politics from which we are otherwise barred, thanks to the facilities of the internet.

As a political exile and a national of a country whose citizens are demonized all over the world, I am caught permanently in what I have described elsewhere as a "terrain of difficulty", and therefore am able, perhaps, to appreciate certain, peculiar advantages of connectivity better than others. It may be revealing to note that after the conference in Madrid in June 1996, I was unable to leave the country on my way to England, and was placed under security interrogation at Madrid airport until my flight was gone, making it necessary for me to spend another night in Spain before I could leave. With connectivity one is able to avoid that kind of treatment while remaining effectively joined to others. It is this kind of interzonal where one does not require eight weeks to obtain a visa or risk body searches at points of entry that I am interested in.

I am not sure whether it is the same as the 'third space' of postcolonial rhetoric. In any case the concept of a 'third' locale is not one that I warm up to. I think the megapolis of indeterminate nationality, the interzone of mediated allegiance, is the condition of our times. It is not a territory of marginality or some 'third space', and advanced connectivity is contributing significantly to the ascendance and consolidation of this megapolis.

**Is interzonal actually a reality for those who never left Africa? Or is it rather a construction of those who have long migrated to the West? How can the dwellers of the "silent territories" made to be heard within this interzone (obviously, it cannot be done via a predominantly Western framework)? I know this is a very huge question but I would be happy if you gave just a few hints.**

I am not quite sure what your point is, especially if you recall that parts of Africa are appreciably connective and therefore firmly located on the global digital cartograph, while, as I have repeatedly pointed out, a good portion of the population of Wien is probably not. In other words leaving Africa is neither a condition, nor a guarantee, for connectivity or interzonal. However, I am presently studying the interesting phenomena of cybernations and cyberdiasporas; the fact that the interzonal provided by cyberspace is mediated by the inescapable persistence of real locations, national boundaries and allegiances, and the peculiarities of dislocation. Cyberdiasporas—net presences established by individuals and communities in expatriation—are proving an important route through which territories on the outside of connectivity find representation in cyberspace. **Does this not raise the old question/problem of who it should be who does the representation business? They themselves or somebody else (the expatriated)? There seem to be problems with both alternatives.**

It does, of course, and I brought up this question in Madrid, also. Yet, there is a certain, difference between the expatriate and what has been described as the "intimate outsider", that is, the sympathetic outsider who designates herself representative. Obviously, there is a shade of difference between affiliation, involvement, and empathy. The cultural debates that go on in cyberspace among Nigerians or Kenyans in exile are, no doubt, different from the contemplation of the Nigerian or Kenyan question by Americans and Europeans, no matter how well-meaning and positively intended the later are. Without the affiliation [from the Latin 'filialis' - of a son or daughter] that legitimizes the expatriate's privileged claim to her country and community, representation is almost unacceptable.

**One of your arguments concerns the place of African artists in the West which you**

**call "a terrain of difficulty"? How would you describe this terrain (in terms of surveillance, peripheries etc.)? It seems as if the work of African artists is usually reduced to their "origins", ethnicity and so on? Do you see any viable strategies for overcoming this persistent reductionism?**

The details and challenges of Western resistance to the idea of progress for other cultures is one that we cannot possibly do justice here, and I would rather refer readers to my work in this area part of which, obviously, you are familiar with. Briefly stated, the art and intellectual establishments in the West circumscribe African cultural production with what I have referred to as "the demand for identity". In other words Africans are required to stick to certain specifications of imagery and representation which, in the minds of the West truly represent its Arcadist imaginary of Africa. An artist like myself working in new media and at the forefront of conceptual practise is dismissed as "too western" if not "white" while beer-parlor sign writers and doll makers are adopted as the true, authentic African artists. You are supposed to lose your Africanity—whatever that is—for the simple reason that you work with digital technology rather than sheepskin or brown paper and gouache donated by Anthony Caro.

This is, of course, quite offensive and insulting. I lived in London for six years and have traveled round the world, and I can point to thousands of rather beautiful and quite accomplished beer-parlor signs in every city from London to Munich to Sydney, none of which is presented in exhibitions as representative of contemporary British or European art. When it comes to Africa, however, it is signs like those and their makers that are flown over as quintessential representatives of contemporary African art. This is not only evidence of bad taste; it also points to a clear, racist inclination to identify Africa with signifiers of essential subalternity.

A barber-shop sign is good, authentic contemporary African art, but not good, contemporary British art also. The implication for practitioners like myself is that we are treated with resentment and disregard, and often effectively ruled out from narratives and expositions of contemporary culture. And this is propagated by not only galleries and dealers, but also by such other significant sections of the western art structure as publishers and the critical establishment.

Two of the most reputable art publishing houses in the world, Abrams of New York and Thames and Hudson of London, have just issued a new book on contemporary African art put together by Andre Magnin, a French culture broker who has stated in print that African artists are only worth their salt if they received no education, and this book is filled with barber-shop signs and really terrible examples of folk and naive art. Not a single artist working in the international contemporary mode, or indeed anyone who worked in the true modernist manner, is included, and this because they received education. In effect Africans are supposed not to be educated, according to Thames and Hudson's historian of contemporary African art.

On the other hand I have completed a monograph on El Anatsui, one of the continent's most important contemporary sculptors who has shown at almost all the international biennials in the past decade and has worked alongside artists from Antony Gormley to Marina Abramovic in addition to winning an honorable mention in Venice in 1990 and the Kansai Sculpture Prize in the Osaka Biennial in 1995. Yet nobody would either give this artist a show in a decent space in the West, or publish the monograph on his work. This is the nature of the terrain that we occupy for committing the crime of not swinging atop trees.

This is the terrain that I refer to as the terrain of difficulty, and I doubt that I have an answer to the question of how the West may overcome its proclivity for a reductionist perspective on Africa other than that it ought to overcome it if it must redeem its own claims to civility. A society that promotes and consumes art that it considers of poor quality when produced within its own boundaries is not particularly sensible or civilized, obviously.

There is a clear challenge for all facets of the art and critical establishment, from galleries and collectors to the art media and its advertizers, to step out of the current primitivist desire for fetishes of subalternity and begin to see every good artist as appreciable, collectible, and exhibitable irrespective of their supposed origins or the color of their skins. Ironically Clement Greenberg had a rather simple, critical formula which we all ought to reconsider and perhaps return to: "good, bad," said Greenberg in an interview with Robert Burstow in 1992, "good, bad, that's all." The color of an artist's passport should have nothing to do with it.

**This brings me to my last point: multiculturalism. It occurs to me that multiculturalist ideologies in the West often operate on a very superficial level. They even become the basis of a new kind of racism (a racism which acknowledges difference) while at the same time leaving economic conditions completely untouched? These "hegemonic multiculturalists" sometimes have a liberal stance towards "the other" while staying in complete economic control. What do you think?**

I agree completely. Not only do many purveyors of multiculturalist rhetoric retain economic primacy, they retain discursive control also, and it is this that I dealt with in my lecture in Rome. Much of it is about careerism, and the danger is that the genuine voices of multiculturalist discourse, those who are involved because their lives are circumscribed by the exigencies of intolerance based on difference, those who have, in fact, defined the proper, practical contours of multicultural engagement, are occasionally drowned out by the rat-race, liberal pretensions of career opportunists. You find a prominent distance from activist political engagement and a reduction of serious questions to the confines of the text. Not only are real battles decidedly avoided, the excesses of rhetoric also attract vicious, extremist right wing backlashes.

That is the quandary in which multicultural discourses in America, for instance, are caught now, with the right battering down on a supposed radical, intellectual contingent that, in fact, departed its radical history and tradition long ago and escaped into the labyrinths of the text.