

# Postcolonialism and the Politics of Hypermedia Culture

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## Abstract

*This paper tries to examine the politics of hypermedia culture on the Internet in relation to current postcolonial theorization. The structure of the paper is divided in two parts. The first part deals with some critical issues regarding the composition of mainstream postcolonialism. The intervention of postcolonialism by critics like Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, and Masao Miyoshi points to a rather complicated relationship between postcolonialism and global capitalism. To carry out the radical political, cultural objective avowed by postcolonialism, postcolonial critiques need to engage the issue of globalization rather than focus exclusively on the past history of colonization. Our discussion then turns to hypermedia on the Internet, which can be seen as quintessentially a product of globalization. Drawing on the insights of the critics discussed in the first part, the second part of the paper tries to show how the complexity of the politics of hypermedia culture cannot be adequately understood without taking into consideration issues of postcoloniality. The need to engage questions of postcoloniality when mapping postmodern space suggests a new direction for further postmodern/postcolonial theorization.*

## Postcolonialism and Its Critics

In spite of its popularity in academic circles, "postcolonial" remains a prob-

lematic and suspicious theoretical concept for many critics. One issue often raised by critics of postcolonialism is the ambiguous relationship between the postcolonial (allegedly a predominantly “third world” phenomenon) and the postmodern (usually found in discourse about the “first world”). It often happens that the “postcolonial” easily slides into the “postmodern” and the boundary between what is designated by the postcolonial and what is defined as the postmodern is difficult to demarcate (see Tiffin 1988, 1991; Hutcheon 1991). Indeed, the Indian Marxist scholar Aijaz Ahmad sees the “postcolonial” so entrenched in the first-world postmodern rhetoric that he remarks sarcastically that “in order to be a properly *postcolonial discourse*, the discourse must be *postmodern*, mainly of the deconstructive kind, so that only those intellectuals can be truly *postcolonial* who are also *postmodern* ( Ahmad,1995, p.10).

On the other hand, the “postcolonial” is used to cover such a wide-range of experience and writing that the radical political objective avowed by postcolonial critics is seriously undermined. Fundamental to this controversy in the use of the term is the politics of location. In their attempt to theorize and demarcate “postcolonial literature” as a special field of study, the writers of *The Empire Writes Back* define the “postcolonial” in the following way: “We use the term ‘postcolonial’, however, to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. So the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada... are all postcolonial literatures. The literature of the USA should also be placed in this category” (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 2). Thus, writings ranging from those by indigenous writers from ex-colonies to “settler literatures” in first-world countries like Canada (see, for example, Hutcheon, 1991) all come under the category of “postcolonial writing.” It appears that the “postcolonial” not just designates a specific position of enunciation occupied by indigenous people in writing about their experience of oppression and exploitation under colonization; it can also be claimed by white settler-writers in many first-world countries.<sup>1</sup> The result of such a wide application of the term, as Ahmad (1995, p.9) argues, inevitably leads to the evacuation of the very meaning of the word and renders the term useless for theoretical, analytical discussion. But something more delicate than the viability of the postcolonial as a theoretical conceptual category is involved here. While the postcolonial tends to be confused with the postmodern, it is also often used interchangeable with the term “the third-world.” As Arif Dirlik (1994, p.336) shrewdly

observes, the substitute of the term “postcolonial” for “the third world” skillfully and strategically suppresses the importance of location and opens up the term for appropriation by first-world critics and writers.

The complexity of the debate and the ideological struggles involved warn against an over-simplistic view of the debate about the definition of postcolonialism as a mere textual excursion. Histories of literary terms tell us that ambiguity in definition certainly is not a problem exclusive to the postcolonial. The controversy raised by the term “postmodernism” over the past years readily comes to mind. To see the criticism of postcolonialism as a fuss over definition not just is myopic but overlooks the broader ideological questions these critiques are pointing to. In other words, what is fundamental to the debate on the usage of “the postcolonial” is not the question of whether we can come up with a “proper” definition of the term for textual exercises and analyses. Rather, the question is one about the construction of postcolonialism as a radical theoretical discourse in opposition to Western colonialist or imperialist hegemonic powers.<sup>2</sup> A critical examination of the role postcolonialism plays in ideological struggles is necessary for any cultural studies that try to map the cultural composition of the present age.

In the following, I will first examine a few crucial theoretical points offered by critics of postcolonialism—particularly those brought up by Aijaz Ahmad (1991), Arif Dirlik (1994) and Masao Miyoshi (1993). For all three critics, the direction postcolonialism has developed and the particular form it has been cast in academic discourse look quite suspicious when analyzed in the context of the recent development of global politics and its impact on the academic institutions. All three critics see the current fashionable form of postcolonialism as deeply implicated in a power structure dominated by the bourgeois class and mainly serving the interests of global capitalism. In their different ways, the three critics try to insert the issues of class and capitalism into the current postcolonial debate. Drawing on the insights of these critics, I will engage the question of the politics of internet hypermedia culture and situate my discussion in the context of recent discussion of cultural imperialism and transnational capital.

## Postcolonialism and Global Capitalism

As early as 1989, Tim Brennan had already begun to raise issue with what he called

“the cosmopolitanism” of much of what came to be categorized as post-colonial writing. Brennan argues that the rise of certain highly publicized Third World writers, such as Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee, should not be interpreted naively as a sea-change of the ideological sympathies in the Western intellectual circles. The celebration of the new cosmopolitanism in the West is politically suspicious and calls into question again the possibility of separating academic trends from the operation of socio-political forces in the broader context. Brennan observes that the new cosmopolitanism, as exemplified in the writings of writers like Vargas Llosa, Isabel Allende, Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes and Bharati Mukherjee, has several distinctive features:

But for all their differences, [cosmopolitan writers] seem to share a harsh questioning of radical decolonisation theory; a dismissive or parodic attitude towards the project of national culture; a manipulation of imperial imagery and local legend as a means of politicising “current events” and a declaration of cultural “hybridity”—a hybridity claimed to offer certain advantages in negotiating the collisions of language, race and art in a world of disparate peoples comprising a single, if not exactly unified, world. (Brennan, 1989, p. 7)

As such, this new cosmopolitan literature is quite different from another category of third-world literature—namely, the “resistance literature” that is closely associated with independence movements. For Brennan, the dubious, complicitous aspect of cosmopolitan writings is all but too clear once we register the point that the ascending popularity of this new cosmopolitanism happens at a time when defensive nationalism is on the Third World agenda.

In his discussion, Brennan refers to this group of writing as “cosmopolitan” rather than “postcolonial” writing, but we have to bear in mind that when Brennan published his article in 1989, the term “postcolonial” was not that widely circulated in academic discourse as it is today. Brennan’s critique of the postcolonialism as manifested in the group of literary works he discusses is concerned mainly with the status of “the national question” in postcolonial discourse. Brennan observes that “[the] writers I group together here in various ways all supply skeptical readings of national liberation struggles from the

comfort of the observation tower, making that skepticism authoritative” (p.6).

Like Brennan, Aijaz Ahmad (1992) is critical of the formation of postcolonialism in Western academic circles. Like Brennan, Ahmad notices the close relationship between the recent popularity of “postcolonial” writing and the trendy poststructuralist debunking of nations and nationalisms in the Western intellectual circle. However, Ahmad approaches the problems of postcolonialism from a perspective quite different from the one that informs Brennan’s article. Ahmad’s main objection is that the current articulation of postcolonialism works mainly for the vested interests of the bourgeoisie and that class issues are often suppressed in those writings labeled as postcolonial discourse. As far as the question of the nation and nationalism is concerned, Ahmad’s attitude is far from the poststructuralist stance though he certainly has much critical to say about bourgeois-dominated nationalist movements. In Ahmad’s words,

For human collectives in the backward zones of capital, however, all relationships with imperialism pass through their own nation-states, and there is simply no way of breaking out of that imperial dominance without struggling for different kinds of national projects and for a revolutionary restructuring of one’s own nation-states. So one struggles not against nations and states as such but for different articulations of class, nation and state. (1992, p.11)

Thus, Ahmad stresses the importance of putting the class question back on the agenda of any discussion of postcolonialism and makes it quite clear that he does not object so much to nationalism as to the domination of the national bourgeoisie in the articulation of nationalism.

While Brennan finds fault with what he calls the “cosmopolitanism” of the writers he discusses for downplaying the importance of the national question, Ahmad criticizes the same group of writing for what he calls “the rhetoric of migrancy” which elides the class question. Salman Rushdie’s celebration of the in-betweenness of postcolonial writing position is taken to be representative of this particular stance of postcolonial migrancy. For Ahmad,

The ideological ambiguity in these rhetorics of migrancy resides in the key fact that

the migrant in question comes from a nation which is subordinated in the imperialist system of intra-state relationships but, simultaneously, from the class, more often than not, which is the dominant class within that nation—this, in turn, makes it possible for that migrant to arrive in the metropolitan country to join not the working classes but the professional middle strata, hence to forge a kind of rhetoric which submerges the class question and speaks of migrancy as an ontological condition, more or less. (1992, p.13)

Ahmad therefore insists on a line being drawn between forced exile and the self-exile of celebrated “postcolonial” writers. While forced exile involves a sense of anguish, self-exile characteristically has a class dimension and is found among artists “in every successive phase of bourgeois culture since the early days of Romanticism” (Ahmad, 1992, p.158). It is therefore not surprising at all that the postcolonialism advanced by these self-exiled elite immigrant intelligentsia should evacuate the class question. The result is the over-privileging of the national question in postcolonial writing.

Here we see a fundamental difference between Brennan’s and Ahmad’s critiques of postcolonialism. While Brennan suggests that the questions associated with national identity and nationalism are essential to the composition of “real” postcolonialism, Ahmad finds fault with mainstream postcolonial discourse for privileging the national question at the expense of the class question. In Ahmad’s view, the class-bound characteristic of postcolonialism is further verified by what he calls the “embourgeoisement” of the political and economic structure of so many third-world countries after their independence. He says: “The key fact about the post-colonial history of this so-called Third World is that each nation-state comes under the dominance of a distinct national bourgeoisie (existing or emergent) as it emerged from the colonial crucible and was then assigned a specific location in the international division of labour as it is organized by imperialism...” (Ahmad, 1992, p.16). Considering the fact that global capitalism is enacting a rapid transformation in our world and that the bourgeoisie of post-colonial nation-states are more than willing to embrace the global capitalist system, Ahmad proposes a re-orientation of critical practices that think of the systems of oppression and exploitation not in terms of opposing nation-states, but in terms of class struggles.

Although noticeable differences may be found in Brennan’s and Ahmad’s critiques of

postcolonialism as it is represented and circulated in first-world intellectual circles, both critics show particularly a distaste for the metropolitan flavor of much postcolonial discourse. Both see the metropolitanism of mainstream postcolonialism as closely associated with the elite immigrant intelligentsia's interests of finding a place in first-world metropolitan countries. This underlying bourgeois professional interest in the current formation of postcolonialism is also taken up by Arif Dirlik (1994) in "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism." Dirlik begins his essay by posing an answer to Ella Shohat's question "When exactly...does the 'post-colonial' begin?" The answer, which he describes as "only partially facetious," is: "When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe." Dirlik then carefully distinguishes "postcolonial as a description of intellectuals of Third World origin" from "postcolonial as a description of this world situation"(p.331). Both descriptions suggest ideological duplicity. Beginning with an examination of the second meaning of the term, Dirlik contrasts "postcolonial" with its predecessor term "third world." While the latter term emphasizes the importance of geographical location in identity politics, "postcolonial" obliterates the important difference in geopolitical positions and thus transforms the identity of the postcolonial into a discursive one. This new term strategically helps "to regroup intellectuals of uncertain location under the banner of postcolonial discourse." As a result, the "postcolonial" becomes a negotiable symbolic capital and newfound power for professional intellectuals. "Postcolonial" may have distinguishable meanings as described by Dirlik, but it turns out that these different designations eventually consolidate each other to serve the interests of a particular class.

This may help shed light on the particular critical orientation of postcolonialism as it has been developed in first-world metropolitan sites. While Ahmad smells something fishy in postcolonial critics' privileging of the national question and suppression of the class question, Dirlik urges for a critical investigation of the ideological implication of postcolonial critics' peculiar silence on "the relationship of the idea of postcolonialism to its context in contemporary capitalism." So far the large corpus of postcolonial theories has focused mainly on questions concerning colonial violence and the cultural legacy of the colonial past. It has said relatively little about the present. For Dirlik, "postcoloniality is designed to *avoid* making sense of the current crisis and, in the process, to cover up the origins of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much

victims as beneficiaries” (p.353).

In other words, Dirlik proposes that we examine the current configuration of postcolonialism in the context of global capitalism. Dirlik’s contextualized interpretation of the rise and current orientation of postcolonialism exposes not only the complicated relationship between academic studies and global capitalism but also draws attention to the urgency of addressing the issues of global capitalism in theorizing about postcoloniality in our age. Thus, to Shohat’s question “When exactly...does the ‘post-colonial’ begin,” Dirlik now gives a less facetious answer: “with the emergence of global capitalism”(p.352). Dirlik argues that the rapid spread of transnational capitalism requires a cultural move which abandons cultural parochialism in favor of multiculturalism. It is helpful here to consider Dirlik’s point in conjunction with the point made by George Yudice (1995) in his discussion of the politics of consumption in the age of transnational corporatism. Yudice notices that business companies often employ multi-cultural rhetoric as they seek to capture an expanding range of consumers.<sup>3</sup> In Yudice’s words, “politics and culture become intertwined as they traverse the terrain of state, media, and market” (p.13). Although multi-culturalism has its constructive political meaning, its less sanguine side as a co-opted cultural movement in the service of transnational corporations should not escape critical attention.

Like Yudice, Dirlik notices that the multi-culturalist turn in the cultural and academic arena has much to do with the spread of advanced capitalism. The entangling relationship between transnationalism and multiculturalism certainly begs much thought. When the business companies of international trade join feminists and anti-racists in promoting multi-culturalism, the situation is ironically twisted. In saying that the post-colonial begins with the emergence of global capitalism, Dirlik is drawing attention to a specific aspect of postcolonialism which has been left undiscussed. Dirlik sums up the challenge for postcolonial critics as follows:

I would suggest...that postcoloniality is the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism. The question, then, is not whether this global intelligentsia can (or should) return to national loyalties but whether, in recognition of its own class-position in global capitalism, it can generate a thoroughgoing criticism of its own ideology and formulate practices of resistance against the system of which it is a



product. (p.356)

Though Dirlik casts his criticism of postcolonialism in a way that makes issues of global capitalism more pertinent to postcolonial theorization, he and Ahmad develop their arguments along rather similar lines. Questions of class and capitalism, which have not been much attended to by postcolonial critics, are brought up on the table. The critical intervention of postcolonialism from this angle is particularly constructive, for it helps to reorient postcolonialism toward the present.

The need to examine postcolonialism and related issues in the context of transnational capitalism is also brought up by Masao Miyoshi (1993) in "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State." Ahmad criticizes postcolonialism for the domination of bourgeoisie in its articulation; Dirlik, focusing more on the implication of postcolonialism in the academic circle, shows how postcolonialism is tied up with the interests of bourgeois intelligentsia in pursuit of academic advancement. For Miyoshi, it is simply misleading to talk about "postcolonialism," for "postcoloniality" as such does not exist at all. Miyoshi argues that, contradictory to what most people believe, colonialism is even more active than ever under the direction of transnational corporations (TNCs).

Adopting an economist approach to the origin and spread of colonialism, Miyoshi sees colonialism as directly linked to the development of capitalism. In his account, colonialist projects were formed as the development of capitalist enterprises demanded more expansive markets and resources. Moreover, advanced industrialization produced a pool of surplus workers which was believed to pose a potential threat to the stability of the society if some other labor markets were not to be quickly created to absorb this surplus labor force. The myth of the nation-state and the myth of the mission of enlightenment were consequently invented and helped persuade workers to embark on long voyages to far-away places to take part in colonialist projects.

Such a view of colonialism makes it possible for Miyoshi to interpret the present age as an age of intensified colonialism. Continuing the line of thinking that sees capitalism as the mobilizing force of colonialism, Miyoshi downplays the importance of the nationalist dimension of old colonialism by arguing that "even the historical nation-state was actually an enabling institution for international enterprises" (p. 749). Once we

agree that the accumulation of capital is at the core of colonialism, it is not difficult to understand why colonialism continues in the age when the great majority of former colonies have become “independent” countries. The exploitation and oppression we see in old colonialism becomes even more intensified as the spread of TNCs inevitably results in an ever widening gap between classes. TNCs continue colonialism; but they “rationalize and execute the objectives of colonialism with greater efficiency and rationalism” (p. 749). Compared with colonialism in the past, this new form of colonialism appears to have more devastating power, for it is welcomed rather than rejected by the nation-states. Now, “since the *raison d’être* of TNCs is maximum profits, the welfare of the people they leave behind, or even the people in the area where they operate, is of little or no concern to them” (p. 746), the great majority of people are left with little protection as their governments court TNCs’ interest in business investments.<sup>4</sup> Miyoshi therefore concludes that “ours, I submit, is not an age of *postcolonialism* but of intensified colonialism, even though it is under an unfamiliar guise” (p.750).

## Hypermedia and Imperialism

It can be safely said that, although Ahmad, Dirlik, and Miyoshi approach the problem of postcolonialism from different angles, they all have much to say about postcolonial critics’ (deliberate) silence on the issues of global capitalism. The problems of global capitalism are too important to be written off from the theorization about “postcoloniality.” Bearing in mind the points made by the three critics, I would like to turn to a phenomenon that is very much a product of globalization—hypermedia on the Internet. Hypermedia culture is especially relevant to the postcolonial theorization as discussed above for at least two reasons. First of all, the operation of hypermedia on the Internet is predicated on the existence of a vast network of transnational capital flow. To theorize about Internet hypermedia is to theorize about culture politics in the age of global capitalism. Discussing relevant issues in the context of imperialism may help us to configure the cultural composition of the present age. Moreover, Internet hypermedia can be said to capture the quintessential spirit of postmodern culture. A critical assessment of the political implication of this new media culture may help to illustrate how questions of postmodern space always involve questions about postcolonial space. The insights

generated out of the postcolonial debate may contribute to the formulation of a cultural politics and help to put us on guard against a mindless subjection to the power of cultural imperialism that is quickly expanding through the hypermedia network.

Postmodernism, of course, is a term no less controversial than postcolonialism. Fredric Jameson (1991) defines postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism.” A historical phenomenon rather than a style that manifests itself in the latest development of capitalism dominated by multinational capital, postmodernism has several distinctive features among which simulacra, pastiche, and the compression of time and space are prominent ones. Postmodern space is the new hyperspace which transcends “the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 1991, p.44). One’s experience of this hyperspace is often characterized by a sense of disorientation which shows “the incapacity of our minds to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Jameson 1991, p.44).

The arch-example used by Jameson to demonstrate postmodern hyperspace is the architecture of Portman’s Bonaventure in Los Angeles, but certainly computer cyberspace equally, if not more adeptly, manifests the quintessential features of Jameson’s hyperspace. All boundaries seem to be totally obliterated in this hi-tech world of postmodern simulation as the concepts (such as gender, nationality, and race) used to group people into various social categories are now all dramatically exploded. Cyberspace, the world of simulacra, is basically a world of performance. Representation is obsolete; the new operating rule of the game is simulation. Cyberspace can be said to herald a new age of new media in which the way we experience and conceptualize human existence is being drastically changed.

The political implication of this postmodern media culture certainly invites in-depth exploration. So far the discussion on the issue falls generally into two categories (see Marilyn Deegan et al., 1996). On the one hand, there are critics who stress the liberating aspect of the new culture (Plant, 1996). As all kinds of disruption and transgression of old boundaries are theoretically possible in cyberspace, we are progressing, the argument goes, towards a “community of unlimited communication.” On the other hand, there are also critics less sanguine about the liberating force of the new media. They argue that we

cannot place too much hope in the emancipating power of the hypermedia, for all but too often traditional dominant values are involuntarily replicated by participants in cyberspace (Wakeford, 1996).

It certainly is undeniable that traditional assumptions of racial or gender roles often operate in cyberspace interaction. One should not lose sight of the fact that cyberspace participants do not live totally in the world of virtual reality. The necessary interaction with the material reality that structures the human world makes it impossible to discount the imperceptible influential power of the physical society with all its biases and prejudices. But leaving this question aside, it is arguable to what degree cyberspace offers a “community of unlimited communication” or the so-called “democratization of information.” It has to be noted that an important feature of cyberspace culture is its highly mediated condition. Marilyn Deegan, Warren Chernaik, and Andrew Gibson (1996) point out that, unlike the traditional form of book-reading, access to the computer world requires complicated mediation. CD-ROMS “need other entities to be interposed between themselves and their readers such as hardware, software, interfaces, operating systems, and readers have to be taught how to use them” (Deegan et al., 1996, p.1). Deegan and her co-editors are talking about computer-using as a work-processing requiring far more complicated skill and training than the ability to read, but the observation about the highly mediated nature of computer-using reminds us of the importance of the economic factor involved in the access to the internet. The membership of cyberspace apparently is not open to all. The cost of updating software, hardware, and all kinds of computer gadgets that pave the way to the “free” world of cyberspace is frightening enough to turn quite a large group of people away. And even when one has the good fortune to amass all the equipment required for participation in cyberspace, one still needs to confront the problem of getting knocked out in the information highway with out-dated models. Material reality does not evaporate in the face of cyberspace; on the contrary, all its effects become even more acute. Douglas Kellner (1989, p.31) remarks in his response to Jameson’s theory of the postmodern that “[one] could question whether any of the features Jameson ascribes to postmodern culture can really be characterized as a cultural dominant rather than simply as emergent features of a new type of culture which is at most dominant in restricted circles.” Granted that cyberspace is representative of postmodern culture, Kellner’s point appears most poignant in the material context delineated above.

Postmodern hyperspace is enjoyed only in restricted circles, and this enjoyment apparently depends very much on economic factors.

In addition, the issue of language in cyberspace community also problematizes the idea of the “community of unlimited communication.” Obviously, people unable to use the English language will find themselves short of communication in cyberspace where a global community is said to communicate without hindrance. Once this question is raised, it is no longer possible to discuss hypermedia culture purely in postmodern terms. Questions of postcoloniality inevitably surface. For people in many third-world countries, the pre-requisites of possessing a well-equipped computer and good English communication ability in order to participate actively in cyberspace expose the fallacy of the so-called “community of unlimited communication.” If the economic network of TNCs as described by Miyoshi creates a transnational class, we have in the Internet space a parallel transnational class. Both groups’ “transnationality” is very much predicated on a high financial profile.

The class dimension of the composition of Internet users makes the talk about a boundary-free global community of communication sound naïve, if not politically suspicious. It should be kept in mind that textual analysis alone can never account for the complicated meanings of cultural phenomena. Rather, what Douglas Kellner (1995a) calls the “political economy of culture”(i.e., analyzing cultural texts within their systems of production and distribution) should always be taken into account when doing cultural studies. In Kellner’s words, “Inserting texts into the system of culture within which they are produced and distributed can help elucidate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay” (1995a, p.9). While it is true that the substitution of virtual bodies for physical bodies in cyberspace makes the transgression of old boundaries theoretically possible, we should not lose sight of the fact that the politics of the Internet hypermedia cannot be reduced to cyberspace performance only. In order to understand the complexity of the hypermedia phenomenon, we probably need the approach of cultural studies advocated by Douglas Kellner (1995b, p.42) that situates the object of study within the system of production, distribution and consumption. Misled by their restricted textual analysis of cyberspace performance, some critics celebrate cyberspace as a free territory constituted by a democratic global community of communication. This approach to the politics of cyberspace, by privileging the analysis of

textual performances of internet-users to the exclusion of other factors that condition the use and spread of the Internet, commits the same mistake some cultural critics make in fetishizing audience resistance in consuming popular media products (see, for example, Kellner, 1995b, p.38).

Far from a territory free from oppression and exploitation, Internet space is tightly woven with the vast network of capitalist exploitation. Microsoft's recent vicious attempt to bundle together its "Internet Explorer" (IE) software with Window 95 so as to knock Netscape out of competition and monopolize the Internet browser market is a case in point.<sup>5</sup> Although the court ruling halts the Microsoft juggernaut in this case, it is of little doubt that computers-users are already deeply entangled in the network of bundled computer products required for the access to the Internet.

But what is at issue here is more than a matter of capitalist consumerism. Tomlinson, in his critique of the current discussion of cultural imperialism, takes issue with the theory that defines cultural imperialism as the imposition of capitalist consumerism on developing societies. The core argument of this theory of cultural imperialism is that capitalism produces a consumer culture that is seen as a cultural ill because of its tendency to commodify all experiences. The spread of consumerism to developing countries results in increasing erosion of cultural differences and eventually creates a world of cultural convergence and homogenization. Tomlinson argues that critics of capitalism want to have their cake and eat it: "On the one hand, capitalism is seen as guilty of denying its material benefits to some, but on the other it is guilty of spreading a shallow, 'materialist culture' predicated precisely on the material achievements: 'delivering the goods'." (p. 107). Tomlinson rejects this theory of cultural imperialism on the ground that "the critique of consumerist penetration of the Third World cannot be separated from the critique of consumerism in the West" (p. 119). If there is something wrong with consumerism, it is a cultural malaise suffered by first-world countries as well. Critics of cultural imperialism argue that third world societies are forced to accept capitalist modernity under the pressure of political-economic imperialism, Tomlinson counter-argues that capitalist modernity is likewise imposed on people in the West (p.167). Tomlinson therefore proposes to conceptualize the situation as a process of "globalization" rather than "imperialism."

Although Tomlinson's treatment of the subject is not lacking in theoretical depth, it

is flawed by an implicit Eurocentric tendency of thinking which leads to an inadvertent elision of the crucial issue of the politics of location in his discussion. It has to be noted that people in different locations experience the same space in different ways. And this difference is crucial. For people in first-world Western countries, cyberspace may represent a postmodern space and Internet consumer culture “euphoria in unhappiness” (Marcuse, 1964) in the late-industrial world. For people in many third-world countries, consumerism involves more than consumption behavior in a capitalist world. In a sense, the internet territory (i.e., the space created by computer network) and cyberspace (i.e., the world of simulation created on the internet) have a neo-colonial dimension for people of the third world. The existence of the former is predicated on the global capital directed mainly by TNCs. We have touched on the problems concerning the connection between TNCs, capitalism, and imperialism via a discussion of Ahmad, Dirlik, and Miyoshi; there is no need to repeat the argument here. Cyberspace, because of the domination of English in this terrain, inevitably entails the questions of identity generated in the colonial encounter which have helped to create a large corpus of postcolonial writing. For people in the third world, the phenomenon of hyper-media involves more questions than those confronted by first-world consumers. For them, the questions are fundamentally about postmodernity; for us, the questions probably have more to do with a new stage of neo-colonialism.

Questions of postcolonialism and postmodernism invite difficult theorization about the age of global capitalism. The terrain of hyper-media is one of the places where all these questions converge; it therefore offers a good testing ground to investigate the implications of relevant theories. In spite of my critical assessment of the hyper-media phenomenon, it is far from my wish to have my argument interpreted as a rampant attack on hyper-media. As Hume points out in his introduction to the 1996 edition of Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx’s stance toward capitalism is not a wholesale condemnation. There are moments in Marx’s writing that Marx “celebrate[s] the achievements of capitalism in overcoming and controlling nature for the good of humanity, through the rapid development of industry, science, agriculture, and telecommunications” (Marx, 1996, p. xii). Jameson makes the same point when he reminds us that “Marx urges us to think this development [of capitalism] positively and negatively all at once; to

achieve a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought.....capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst” (1991, p. 47). Hypermedia should be seen in this way, too. The vision and the movement Internet offers are far beyond what we have ever dreamed for. Internet-users travel around the world in no time and, if fully equipped, move in and out of different spaces almost at will. The liberation from the traditional measures of time and space certainly carries constructive meaning. As the most representative product of the stage of late capitalism, hyper-media should be conceived as both liberating and oppressive at the same time. With its power to obliterate fixed boundaries and open up the possibility of an epistemic revolution, hypermedia’s emancipating potential certainly should be duly acknowledged. However, it is over-optimistic to celebrate unreservedly hypermedia’s liberating power without pausing for a minute to ponder on its gloomy, oppressive side. The political implication of hyper-media in conjunction with questions of neo-colonialism and postcoloniality is worth further exploration, for ultimately it is concerned with what Jameson (1988) calls “cognitive mapping” in understanding the contemporary world and envisioning the future.

## Notes

1. See Linda Hutcheon’s argument about “various histories of colonialism” in the Canadian experience. Linda Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout of Empire.” *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-colonialism and Post-modernism*. Eds. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991. 167-89. It is helpful to consider Arif Dirlik’s rather different argument on the same subject . See Dirlik’s “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Winter 1994): 328-56.
2. The terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” are often used interchangeably by critics. However, a distinction can still be made between these two terms. According to B. C. Smith (1996:ix), “Imperialism, a foundation of contemporary Third World status, has been defined in different ways: obtaining sovereignty; forceful annexation; a stage of capitalism; and colonialism. Imperialism is, however, mainly an economic concept,



while colonialism is mainly social and political.” My discussion of relevant issues tries to maintain this distinction, hence the use of “imperialism” in discussing global capitalism.

3. Examining the function of multi-culturalism in an age of consumerism, Yudice finds that the practice of corporate management often belies the rhetoric of multiculturalism deliberately publicized by the companies. Studies show that the actual composition of workforces and management personnel in these companies are deeply implicated in racism and sexism. See George Yudice,, “Civil Society, Consumption and Governmentality in an Age of Global Restructuring,” *Social Text* 45 (Winter 1995), p.10.
4. It is useful to consider Alex Callinicos’s point here. In Callinicos’s views, the old division of labor in which “backward” countries supply the raw material for the manufacturing “advanced” countries is breaking down, for more and more artificial products invented by high technology are now capable of replacing the raw material that used to be supplied by “backward” countries. This results in an increasing self-sufficiency of advanced enclave; the main flows of capital are circulated within the developed countries and pass the poor countries. Therefore, “the norm in the Third World was not intensive exploitation by the Western multinationals, but rather the effective exclusion of most poor countries from world trade and investment”(38). In other words, poor countries often consider it a necessity for survival to be incorporated into the structure of TNCs. This leaves little room for anti-imperialist resistance. It is interesting to see how Callinicos’ s view of imperialism today differs from Miyoshi’s. However, both critics point out how Western multinationals are welcomed rather than rejected by less advanced countries. See Alex Callinicos, “Imperialism Today.” *Marxism and the New Imperialism*. Alex Callinicos et al. London, Chicago, Melbourne: Bookmarks. 1994. 11-66.
5. In the recent trendy wave of “post-nation imaginary” sentiment, the Microsoft case may also serve as a timely reminder that state-power does not necessarily always works against the interests of the people. In an age that sees the ever-expanding power of TNCs, state might be our last hope to curb the malicious exploitative tendency of transnational corporations.

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本篇論文為國科會計劃 NSC 88-2411-H-005-006 的部份研究結果