

Meetings with Others: a critique of multiculturalism

Ingrid Stevens and Allan Munro

Faculty of the Arts, Tshwane University of Technology
stevensie@tut.ac.za and munroa@tut.ac.za

Multiculturalism can be celebrated from a positive perspective or criticized from a negative perspective. The postcolonial writings of Edward Said (1978) and Ziauddin Sardar (1998), although separated by some twenty years, both offer a critique of multiculturalism from the viewpoint of the colonized Other. Having established the motivations for such a critique, this article then examines western art, both traditional and contemporary, to show that visual representations can also be implicated in these unequal power structures of multiculturalism. It ends by offering a brief critique, in turn, of the approach of Said and Sardar and suggests some positive approaches to multiculturalism.

Keywords: multiculturalism, postcolonialism, the Other, visual representations

Multikulturalisme kan gevier of besing word vanuit 'n opbouende perspektief, of gekritiseer word vanuit 'n negatiewe perspektief. Alhoewel die geskryfte van Edward Said (1978) en Ziauddin Sardar (1998) deur meer as twintig jaar geskei word, bied albei skrywers 'n kritiese blik op multikulturalisme vanuit die perspektief van die gekoloniseerde 'Other.' Hierdie artikel sal eerstens die motivering van so 'n kritiese blik bepaal, en daarna sal dit die westerse kuns, beide traditionel en kontemporêr, ondersoek om daardeur aan te dui dat visuele voorstellings ook verwickel kan word in hierdie ongelyke magsstrukture van multikulturalisme. Die artikel eindig deur 'n kort kritiese blik aan te bied van die benadering van beide Said en Sardar, en stel dan 'n aantal positiewe benaderings tot multikulturalisme voor.

Sleutelwoorde: multikulturalisme, postkolonialisme, die Ander, visuele voorstellings

Culture is, according to the Collins dictionary, the sum of the ideas, customs, religion and art of a particular society. Multiculturalism, then, is the meeting of different societies and their cultures, ideas, customs, religions and art. Multiculturalism is a complex topic, and one fraught with dissent, different critical perspectives and strong arguments. This article aims to define multiculturalism, particularly in relation to cultural products, and then to examine key postcolonial theorists who have been and are critical of it. The main theoretical foci of the article are key texts by two important post-colonial writers, Edward Said's *Orientalism: western conceptions of the Orient* (1978) and Ziauddin Sardar's *Postmodernism and the other: the new imperialism of western culture* (1998). Having constructed a critique of multiculturalism based on their writings, we will then investigate selected western representations of the Other¹ to show how visual representations can be implicated in such a critique of multiculturalism.

Meetings with Others: defining multiculturalism

It can be argued that, both globally and in South Africa, people now live largely in multicultural societies. One sign of this is that one can easily 'meet the Other' by experiencing the cultural products of diverse cultures. For example, one sees more foreign films than ever before: not only American Hollywood films, which were always all too available, but films from Iran, Senegal and India, to name just a few. So-called 'world' music is now readily available, and western pop stars like Sting and Paul Simon work with musicians from Algeria or rural South Africa, to find renewal in a hybridised music. At a recent World Music Award event held in London, musicians from Calcutta, Mali, Spain, Bulgaria, Cuba, Tibet, Mexico, Argentina, Tuareg nomads and Sufi musicians, to name just a few, took part (McDaid 2005: 12). Visual artists and artworks travel from one country to another, not just between western countries, but much further afield. The international Biennales are no longer held in Venice for mainly western artists, but on what were the peripheries, in Johannesburg, Seoul and Sao Paulo. These huge exhibitions show work that is made by artists who are largely not western, but come from all over Africa, the Middle and

Far East, Cuba and South America.² In the same way, one could look at literature, philosophy, and other cultural forms and find meetings with Others.

It is within the postmodern environment that such meetings take place, and this is said to be characterized by pluralism, multiculturalism and hybridity, among other conditions. As Sardar (1998: 18) remarks, “[i]n postmodern times, the emphasis is squarely on cultural and traditional diversity. The byword for postmodernism, Jencks tells us, is ‘pluralism’...”. Postmodernism, according to Sardar and many other writers, is concerned with variety and multiplicity, emphasizing plurality of ethnicities, cultures, genders, truths, realities, sexualities. In its concern to demolish all privilege, postmodernism seeks a more equal representation of class, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and culture, which can be seen as the basis of what we will term a positive multiculturalism.

This multicultural exposure can be seen to be an exciting and invigorating aspect of multiculturalism.³ It is, in short, the inclusion of different voices into mainstream, or international culture. While they are not necessarily ‘new’ voices, they may seem new because they had been unavailable or excluded previously, for various reasons. There seems to be ample reason to celebrate multiculturalism and its engagement with diversity. But the meeting of different cultures is often a difficult, negotiated exchange, potentially fraught with conflict, racism and misunderstandings. This can be termed negative multiculturalism.

Negative multiculturalism

In the past, and indeed, most painfully in some countries, in the present, when two or more cultures have met, one has inevitably dominated the others, and so we can speak of dominant, or even oppressor, cultures, and subordinate, or oppressed, cultures. Historically, dominant cultures have physically occupied other countries or territories, and have dominated them politically, militarily, economically, culturally and linguistically, to the benefit of the oppressor and the detriment of the oppressed. Generally, those aspects that make up culture, such as language, religion, morals and art, become those of the dominant culture, and the subordinate culture is suppressed, or ‘silenced’. The dominant culture controls the cultural discourse, one might say, and controls what can be ‘said’.⁴ This dominance of the discourse is reflected in terms that arise from the dominant culture to refer to the ‘other’ culture, like ‘we/them’ or the ‘other’; and in stereotypes of difference, like civilized/primitive; rational/irrational; advanced/backwards and so on.⁵

The most obvious example of such cultural domination is colonialism. Many colonialisms have existed throughout history, for example, the Roman and Ottoman Empires, African tribe towards African tribe, Mongol colonisation of China, Arab colonisation of north Africa, Japanese colonialism, on small local scales and on world-wide scales. We refer throughout to western colonialism, because it is the most recent, the most widespread and has had the most effects on other parts of the world, usually if not always negative and even devastating effects, and also because, some would argue, it continues still.

Western colonialism, after a two or three hundred year history of conquest and domination, began to recede in at least the sense of physical and military domination after World War 2, as, for example, Britain, France, Portugal, Spain and Belgium left their colonies in Africa and the Middle and Far East. Accompanying this, the Other began to ‘speak’ out, so to say, or, to quote a book title, ‘the empire began to speak back’. This speaking back or speaking out led to the development of much theoretical, historic and philosophical discourse, as the previously colonized and their sympathizers in the former colonial powers began to try to understand

and counteract the effects of this long and often destructive colonialism. This developed into the discourse of post-colonialism. One of the earliest to 'speak' back was Edward Said, in *Orientalism: western conceptions of the Orient*.

Said was a Palestinian, born in Jerusalem, who studied in the west and eventually taught at Columbia University in the USA, so he himself has moved from one culture to another, suppressed to dominant, and is in a good position to analyse and offer a critique of colonialism.⁶ He quoted a famous Marxian phrase about the attitude of the colonizers towards the colonized: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented". This implies not just political representation, but also culturally and in art, in fact in all ways, 'they' could not speak but must be spoken for. Said analysed the whole discipline of oriental studies, that is the academic discipline in the west by which the west studied, examined and tried to understand the Orient. In this 'Orient', Said included North Africa and especially Egypt, the Middle East, the colonies of the Far East and India. These fields of Oriental study include geography, languages, art historical studies, anthropology and ethnography, since the late seventeenth century. It was Said's argument that the knowledge so gained was not simply scholarly, apolitical or neutral: it was a tool of power. The dominant culture could study and could 'know' the oppressed culture, but the latter had no power to examine or understand the oppressor. The knowledge was a one-way street. In other words, it helped the west to dominate, structure and control the colonized Others. It established the idea of the Orient in cultural stereotypes such as magical, mysterious, splendid, cruel, barbarous, sensual, irrational, unorganized, chaotic, colourful, romantic, dangerous, excessive, etc. "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978: 1). These stereotypes were reinforced in western art, when a poet such as Byron visited the East, and returned to Britain to write poems based on his experiences, poems that made him famous, or by painters such as the Frenchman Eugene Delacroix or the Dutch-British Alma-Tadema. They created, according to Said, "an Orient of the imagination", which could be understood by a superior culture and then controlled.

These non-western people, implied these studies, could not rule themselves but must be ruled; colonialism was 'good' for them. To sum up, Said was one of the first to show that dominant cultures control the discourse, construct the "us" and "them", the "we" and "the other", silence and speak for the Other, and stereotype and generalize about their cultures. Said implies that the solution to domination is multiculturalism, to recognizing that all cultures are complex, hybrid, dynamic, changing and furthermore are inter-related and interdependent, in a truly multicultural world.

However, although colonialism has seemingly ended, and the world is far more multicultural than it was, Said (1978: 2) states that one cannot ignore globalization, which he calls a "system by which a small elite has expanded its power over the whole globe...so that wealth is redistributed from the lower-income to the higher income". This idea has been taken up by a number of writers, among them Ziauddin Sardar, in *Postmodernism and the other: the new imperialism of western culture* (1998).

Sardar looks at postmodernism in its claims, among other things, to be about inclusivity, about multiculturalism, diversity and pluralism, and to be against the exclusivity of modernism. Postmodernism claims to give voice, not only to other cultures, but to women, blacks, gays and all those previously excluded from mainstream culture. It is this postmodernism that is then seen as the reason that we can experience so many more cultural products, as the west opens itself to other cultures on an equal footing. However, Sardar argues against this optimism, and sees postmodernism as simply another guise for the continuation of western domination over much of the rest of the world, no longer through physical presence, conquest or military

power, but more insidiously, through the power of mass communications, the mass media, global capitalism, organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and a general Americanization of the world. The west “replaces repression with seduction. ... For despite its claims to be pluralistic, postmodernism is ravenously monolithic. Its surface pluralism masks a monolithic matrix at its core. Its language, logic, analytical grammar, are intrinsically Eurocentric and shamelessly cannibalistic of Others” (Sardar 1998: 20). The world, he argues, is in fact dominated by a single culture: western, capitalist, English-speaking, scientific, rational, consumption and media driven. With the strong image of the cannibal, Sardar suggests that the ‘multi-cultural’ west takes the histories, identities and the products of non-western cultures in as part of itself and “occupies their being” (Sardar 1998: 13). Everyone becomes a consumer of western products and ideas, and so alternative cultures are eroded. The Other is seduced by the very ideas of pluralism, diversity and multiculturalism, which can thus be seen as insidious forms of neo-colonialism.

Visual representation and the Other

Said does not include visual representations as part of the west’s strategies of domination of the non-west, but Sardar does refer to these. He states that these are all part of the process of “enframing non-western cultures, constructing an image of their reality, and directing their gaze in a particular way” (Sardar 1998: 29-30). He argues that colonialism used representation to construct a particular image of the Other, in order to stereotype, and thereby to exploit and rule. In his view, representational strategies matter in a real, political way. What then are the strategies of representation used by the west to control the Other? Sardar does not specify them, but in our view, they can be seen to incorporate strategies of excluding, exoticizing, commodifying and universalizing.

Excluding is simple as a visual strategy: western painters for example, when constructing images of colonized lands, simply left out the colonized Others: their works imply that no meetings with Others occurred. This has political repercussions. “There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically [the Other] does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental. ... in a sense obliterating him as a human being...” (Said 1978: 27). Furthermore, according to Said (1978: 86), this attitude implied that “the natives had neither been consulted nor treated as anything except as pretexts for a text whose usefulness was not to the natives.” In visual representations, if no Others inhabit the land, then it must be available for habitation and colonization. These spaces are often depicted as vast, empty, harsh, lands which must be physically conquered with difficulty and by pioneering enterprise. Indigenous inhabitants, being non-existent, need nor be considered or consulted: “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or... taken over” (Said 1978: 207).

Examples abound, in paintings of Australia, the American mid-west and by early settlers in South Africa, in which the Other or, in fact, all human presence, is excluded. JEA Volschenk’s paintings of empty veld, mountains and vast plains, for example, his 1915 *Mountains, Riversdale* (Alexander & Cohen 1990: 36) (figure 1) suggest just such an absence of inhabitants and a land ripe for taming and settlement. In a similar approach, humans are indeed depicted, but are very few and somehow small in relation to the vastness of the landscape, again suggesting a land virtually empty, uncultivated and open for colonisation and occupation, for example, Thomas Baines’s 1872 *The lion family among granite hills between Shasha and Macloutsie rivers* (Alexander & Cohen 1990: 30) (figure 2). Alternatively the Other could be depicted as a servant or slave, in the background and powerless, or as an ethnographic specimen.

In another process of exclusion, the dominant culture treated the art of the other as if they had none, or none which could be seen as art from a western perspective. What was made was often seen as craft, as mere artifact, and if bought or collected, went to anthropological or ethnographic museums, not to art museums or galleries.

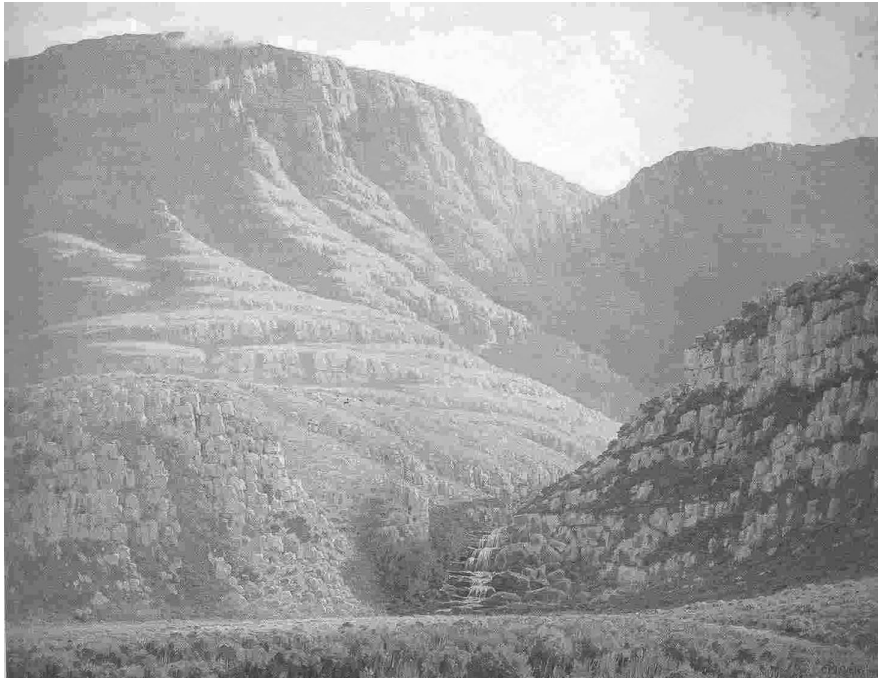


Figure 1
JEA Volschenk, *Mountains, Riversdale*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 76 x 95 cm, Pretoria Art Museum (Alexander & Cohen 1009: 36).

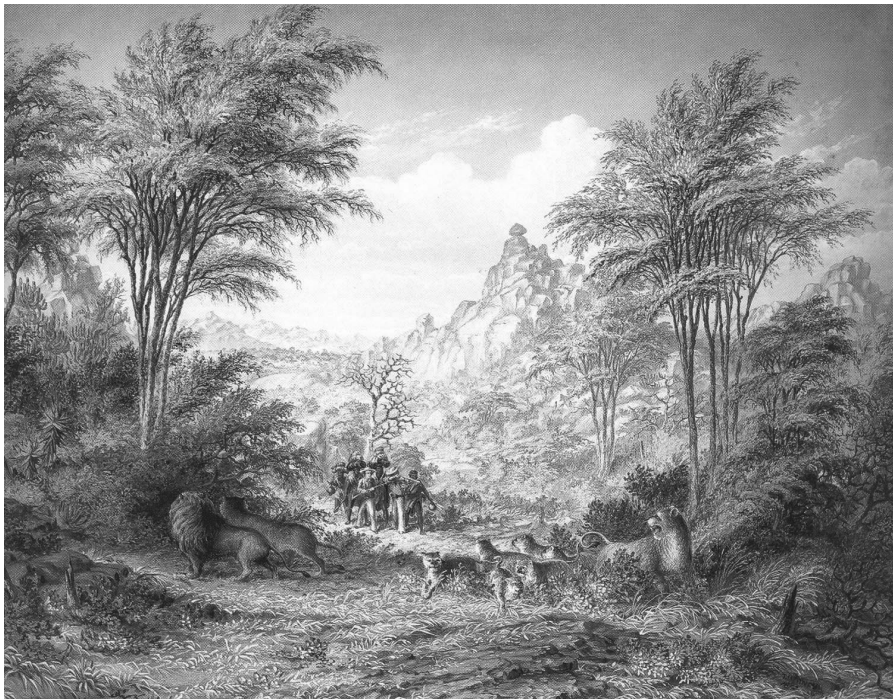


Figure 2
Thomas Baines, *The lion family among granite hills between Shasha and Macloutsie rivers*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 51,3 x 66,7 cm, Sanlam Collection (Alexander & Cohen 1990: 30).

A second visual strategy for dealing with the Other is the act of exoticising. The ‘exotic’ is defined as “strange, bizarre” (Fowler & Fowler 1964: 425), thus exoticising renders the Other

as strange, bizarre or foreign. It is a strategy of stereotyping that constructs the Other in their otherness and generalizes about them. When one uses categories such as Oriental and Western, according to Said (1978: 45-46), the result is to polarize the distinction, so that encounters between different cultures, societies and traditions are limited and circumscribed. Said (1978: 26) points out that for this reason the Other is often seen as dangerous or threatening and has been thus “demonized” since the nineteenth century.



Figure 3

Henri Regnault, *Summary execution under the Moorish kings of Granada*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 302 x 146 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris (Benjamin 1997: 18).

The Other is subsequently depicted as sensual, barbaric, mysterious, threatening, colourful, and in general to be exaggeratedly different from the observer or artist.⁶ Painters such as Delacroix and Alma-Tadema used visual images to construct this “Orient of the imagination” and to create “visions of barbaric splendour and cruelty” (Said 1978: 118). Indeed, exoticising can be seen as a particularly Romantic notion, as in the archetypal image by Regnault (figure 3). Photographers of the Other were equally complicit with the painters in constructing this exotic stereotype (Benjamin 1997: 225), and their works were no more than quasi-realistic, for example in the image of a courtesan by Arnoux (figure 4), one of many women whose images “lead me back there; to the poetry of the oasis and to the caresses of beautiful girls... for they are beautiful, those daughters of the desert..” (Benjamin 1997: 230 quoting an anonymous French officer).



Figure 4

Hippolyte Arnoux, *Odalisque, Egypt*, c. 1880. Albumen print, 20 x 26 cm, Collection Jean-Pierre Evrard, maurepas (Benjamin 1997: 223).

Commodifying equates to Sardar's idea of the cannibalizing of the Other, whereby the dominant culture, in this case the West, appropriates the designs, styles, methods and knowledge of non-western cultures for its own gain, sometimes in the name of multiculturalism or diversity. Examples of commodified products of the Other might include Indian dress, herbal medicines, African beadwork, ethnic music,⁸ and many more cultural objects and products. Paintings by artists such as Delacroix and Alma-Tadema can be seen as a kind of commodification, as they enhanced their careers by depicting the Other for their fascinated audience. Even tourism can be seen as a kind of commodification of a culture. It appropriates aspects of other cultures, repackages them and sells them (figure 5). Sardar is very negative about this, calling it the "destruction of tradition".

However, commodification is complicated by questions of who does it to what and to whom. Take the example of Esther Mahlangu. She is an elderly South African woman from the Ndebele tribe. This tribe has a tradition of painting their houses in geometric patterns. Esther Mahlangu learned the skills from her grandmother and mother, thus as part of a tradition. She is illiterate, and the whole community is very poor, though maintaining traditions in ways that other tribal people who have become urbanized have not. She became famous because the German car manufacturer BMW chose her to fly to Germany to decorate a BMW as part of a promotional project. Because of this, she began to receive other commissions, and is now an artist, using traditional patterns, materials and tools, but applying these to non-traditional surfaces, painting corporate buildings, museums etc. Other women of her tribe have also benefited as work has trickled down to them, and craft centres have started where non-traditional uses are

found for their pattern painting, eg on candles, pots, calendars etc. Now this is indeed cultural commodification, or what Sardar would call cannibalization. But when Mahlangu was asked about this, she replied that there was no problem with it. Like any western artist, why should she not make money out of her skills to support her family? she asked. She sees it as preserving and extending her cultural traditions, not as destroying them. Young girls who might not have been interested are now keen to be trained in these skills. The only time Mahlangu feels exploited is when dealers or buyers do not pay her as agreed, or take advantage of her illiteracy, or when tourists take her photograph without her permission. So the issue of commodification, which might be termed the “domestication of the exotic” (Said 1987: 60), is a complex one.



Figure 5
Commercial plate with traditional Ndebele pattern (Magubane 2005: 148).

Of equal complexity is the strategy of universalizing, which could be seen from a positive perspective as the finding of common ground between different cultures. So for example, it can refer to finding common issues about being human, such as love, faith, fear, suffering etc, and then to detecting these in the products of other cultures, and seeing them as universal to all humanity. The British art critic Peter Fuller (1983) argues that we do indeed share a common humanity, no matter which culture we come from. It is based on very basic, shared human experiences such as birth, maturation, sexuality, aging, illness and death. He argues that it is because of this that one can look at art from the distant past or from different cultures and can appreciate it, it can communicate to one. Thus a westerner might, for example, look at Indian temple sculptures and find great value in them. From this ‘humanist universalism’, the notion that we all share a common humanity, have come ideas such as human rights, international courts of justice, ideas about freedom of expression, of religion, of association, etc.

One positive result of universalizing is found in recent exhibitions where very different arts from different cultures are displayed alongside each other, such as African beadwork alongside an oil painting, or a fetish carving alongside an abstract metal sculpture. These

sorts of exhibitions have had a great impact in introducing different approaches to art into the mainstreams. Examples are *The neglected tradition*, held in Johannesburg in 1987 and *Les magiciens de la terre*, held in Paris in 1989.

The negative side of universalism is that the dominant powers, the west, believed that their values, arts, etc were universal, ie. *they* were the best practice for every culture. Thus western parliamentary democracy becomes the only desirable model of government; the western suit the only appropriate dress for men; blue jeans the dress for youth. From some postcolonial writers such as Franz Fanon, there is the hope that in a truly multicultural, postcolonial world there might arise a true universalism, a “Universal humanity”, that might find commonality beneath difference, rather than a “racist humanism” based on domination.

This negative universalism can, in terms of visual strategies, be seen when western artists relate to or appreciate the works of the Other and, in a romantic fashion, declare these universal. Said (1978: 36, 58) refers to ideas that “pretended to objective universality... [whereby] something patently foreign and distant acquires... a status more rather than less familiar, and in fact becomes over-valued for its difference. Said (1978: 149) also refers to this as “cultural generalization”. The result is often that western artists simply appropriate aspects of the art of the Other into their own work, thus disguising or ignoring “the relationship of strong to weak” (Said 1978: 40). Art made in the non-west, for example, art for ritual or spiritual practices, may be appropriate as universal signifiers of spirituality. The ceramic works of South African artist Deborah Bell, while they may be ‘beautiful’, may be criticized for precisely this kind of universalizing appropriation (figures 6 and 7).⁹



Figures 6 and 7

Deborah Bell, *Crying pot*, 1998. Jar in the shape of a female half figure, Mangbetu, Terracotta, fat, wax and charcoal, Democratic Republic of Congo. Terracotta, no size given (Stein 2004: 64). h 28 cm (Szalay 1998: 217).

These visual strategies of excluding, exoticizing, commodifying and universalizing have as one result the transformation of the cultures of the Other. As Said (1978: 67) writes, in multicultural societies, the dominant cultures “have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.” According to the more radical view of Sardar (1998: 22), these processes are part of many that suffocate non-western cultures.

How to meet the Other

The arguments of both Said and Sardar can themselves be subjected to criticism. They imply a view and definition of culture as a relatively constant and monolithic ‘thing’ that can meet and interact or practice power over another such monolithic ‘thing’. However, it might be more useful and indeed more contemporary to consider ‘culture’ as a series of actions that a community undertakes, making culture a fluid, abstract process, the result of praxis and constantly being imagined, altered and constructed in series of concerted actions. In order for arguments such as those of Said and Sardar to hold, culture needs to be seen as fixed, established and all encompassing as this definition establishes a strong link between culture, power, hegemony and ideology. Both writers are concerned with power and their approaches can be seen as conservative and traditional, even though they appear to participate in the relatively contemporary discourse of post colonialism. Their views of culture may be seen to lag behind the exigencies of the present and of the constant shifting of culture in the light of changing practices. For both, culture lies in the past and must be maintained as a tradition, rather than seen as a dynamic interaction in the present and future. Indeed, multiculturalism itself might be usefully viewed as a culture of its own and not as the unequal meeting of two or more separate and unequal cultures.

However, Said and Sardar might yet make useful arguments about meetings with Others. It is Said’s conclusion that in multicultural societies, studies of non-western cultures, and by extension, representations of Others, must be undertaken in a libertarian, non-manipulative and non-repressive manner. Sardar (1998: 20) would almost certainly conclude that this is impossible. But at least, he advocates that when we speak of the postmodern and of the multicultural ‘we’, ‘we’ recognise that this is not a pluralistic global ‘we’: it applies to those in North America and Europe, and other westernized individuals who are, consciously or unconsciously, genuinely confronted by choices about lifestyles, belief systems and ‘realities’. While we all live increasingly in a so-called multicultural world, with mass migration, immigration, tourism, refugees, a post-Cold War and globalised world, in some senses, and fairly limited ones, this is cause for celebration. When it comes to economics, resources, power and money, and even to issues of representation, such an ideal multiculturalism situation might not exist, so one must also be aware of the dangerous effects that cultures have had and continue to have on each other. In a genuinely multi-cultural world, different cultures must be revived, maintained, must be a choice for the members of that culture, and should not be lost in a homogenized, single, globalised ‘world’ culture.

As Sardar (1998: 281) pleads, in order to develop truly multicultural societies and to meet Others on an equal footing,

[a requirement] is emphasizing indigenous development stemming from traditions and encouraging the norms, language, beliefs, arts and crafts of a people - the very factors that provide meaning, identity, and richness to people’s lives. The corollary of all this is a sensible check on postmodern consumer goods that represent the omnipotence of technology - which induce dependency, thwart self-reliance and expose non-western societies to physical and mental domination.

Notes

1. We use terms such as ‘the west’ and ‘the Other’, meaning non-western cultures, for convenience, knowing that there is no one such thing as the west or the non-west, and that these are shorthand for complex and diverse entities.
2. The fact that these artists come from various places does not necessarily signify that the work
3. For example, in a recent interview, South African film maker, Anant Singh, said his favourite holidays are those spent in countries

itself is ‘non-western’. Some artists from these regions do engage, knowingly or unknowingly, with the western artistic paradigm.

- with cultural diversity so that he can experience this positive multiculturalism (Gill 2004: 3).
4. With the term 'said' or 'speak' we include broadly what can be communicated and expressed, whether through words, actions, art etc.
 5. One example of what some feminist writers see as cultural domination is the argument that all cultures contain within themselves at least two other 'cultures' and that is men and women. In most cultures, men dominate and women are subordinate or even oppressed. Men then control the discourse, 'speak' for women and women are to an extent silenced. The same sort of language of 'othering' is used: men are rational, powerful, strong, controlled, etc, while women are Other.
 6. Said (1978: 27) wrote of his life as an Arab Palestinian in the west as 'disheartening'.
 7. It is interesting to note that previously colonized countries, especially those in the Middle East, have generally adopted these kinds of stereotyped images of themselves, and they are offered everywhere as typical of the region and culture.
 8. The musicians Sting and Paul Simon could be said to be guilty of this.
 9. Tellingly, a viewer remarked of Bell's ceramic pots that "we thought the artist was a black African" (Stein2004: 81)

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Ingrid Stevens is the Head of the Department of Fine & Applied Arts at Tshwane University of Technology. She has a D Tech (Fine Arts) degree from that institution, which focused on sustainability in South African craft projects, while her master's degree investigated contemporary art criticism. She has lectured at the Tshwane University of Technology for 28 years in disciplines that include painting, ceramics and art theory, and has supervised numerous masters' students. She has published extensively, both in the popular press and in scholarly journals, on contemporary art, South African crafts and the discipline of art criticism.

Allan Munro attained a PhD in theatre from the Ohio State University. He has taught in English and Theatre departments at Potchefstroom University, Pretoria University (where he was head of department of theatre) and at the Tshwane University of Technology. His theatre specialisations are in theatre philosophy and criticism, playwrighting and acting and directing. His appointment in the Faculty of the Arts at the Tshwane University of Technology focused his interest in research in the arts, as he had to assist in developing research in the arts across the entire spectrum of arts. He has supervised research projects in Fine and Applied Arts, Graphic Design, Theatre, Film and Photography. He has presented papers at national and international conferences, and conducts lectures and workshops on research in the arts widely. He is the writer of a large number of plays, the latest of which deals with breast cancer.