

# **Global Culture or Cultural Imperialism?**

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## **Abstract**

Virtually unknown until the early 1990s, the term “globalisation” soon became a synonym for the new economic, political and cultural trends that emerged and began reshaping the modern world after the end of the Cold War, conventionally marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991). These data associate globalisation with the demise of communism as an ideology and the triumph of capitalism leading to the unstoppable spread of neoliberal democracies and the establishment of fluid economic, technological and cultural links across their borders. However, the fast incorporation of China to the struggle for global leadership by means of its own “China Mode” of development, and President Vladimir Putin’s sustained attempts, both in terms of cold and hot wars, to destabilise democratic countries and reconstruct the Soviet Union, set the continuation of the Western model of globalisation into question. The essay traces a brief historical overview of the development of this model since the birth of the commercial society and European imperialism, pinpointing the parallel evolution of Western culture throughout the modern and the postmodern periods. It ends broaching the possibility of creating a more sustainable and humane economic, political and cultural model opened up by the ongoing paradigm shift from postmodernity to transmodernity.

## **Introduction**

Virtually unknown until the early 1990s, the term “globalisation” rapidly spread as a catchword engulfing a complex worldwide phenomenon. Usually employed as a form of periodisation, the term soon became a synonym for the new economic, political and cultural trends that emerged and began reshaping the modern world after the end of the Cold War, conventionally marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) (Israel 1). As these data suggest, globalisation is closely associated to the demise of communism as an ideology and the triumph of capitalism

leading to the unstoppable spread of neoliberal democracies and the establishment of fluid economic, technological and cultural links across their borders. The transformative potential of this phenomenon led Francis Fukuyama to contend that the end of the Cold War had brought about “The End of History” (1989). As Henk L. Wesseling explains, in his controversial article, Fukuyama used the term globalisation “in a Hegelian way to indicate that the struggle of competing ideologies had come to an end because a consensus had been reached that the world order should be based on capitalist production and democratic political systems” (Wesseling 461). As Ning Wang notes, Fukuyama implicitly corrected himself in 2011, when he said during a dialogue with Yu Keping, that “China is one of the biggest winners of globalization” (Wang 178). Wang thinks that Fukuyama was right, “even though many people had not yet realized it” (Wang 178), and alerts Western scholars against overlooking the fact “that China is a large oriental country with an enduring civilization, a long history, and a splendid heritage in culture and the humanities” (178), and that, “in engaging with globalization, China has followed a “unique mode of development” —the so-called China Mode— that, “according to Yu Keping, is ‘both different from traditional socialism and from Western developed countries’” (179). Wang also recognises that “the United States is the other biggest winner of globalization, not only economically, politically but also culturally, with American culture being very popular and influential in almost every corner of the present world.” (178–79). However, he has no doubt that sooner or later “China will surpass the latter and become the world’s largest economic entity.” (179). His description of China as both an enduring oriental civilization with its own rich cultural heritage and the impending new economic leader of our globalised world, completely gainsays Fukuyama’s prediction of an everlasting consensual democratic world order. While the China Mode of globalisation, combining oriental culture, communist politics and capitalist economy, constitutes a pragmatic form both of adaptation and opposition to the United States’ economic and cultural leadership, the cold and hot war policy sustained by the Russian Federation since the election of President Vladimir Putin leaves no doubt about the persistence of the secular power struggle between communist and democratic countries. While the fully-fledged cold war policy of disinformation and cybernetic interference in foreign affairs is meant to destabilise democracy by promoting, for example, the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA in 2016 or backing the separatist aspirations of the Catalán Government in 1917, the hot war policy of invasions of neighbouring countries like Afghanistan (1979), Georgia (2008), the Crimean peninsula (2014) and

Ukraine (started on 24 February 2022), may be interpreted both as a response to US foreign affairs policy of global leadership and as an autocratic and somewhat nostalgic attempt to reconstruct the Soviet Union.

### **The Origins of Globalisation: From the Commercial Society to Eurocentric Imperialism**

The struggle for global political, economic and cultural control among the United States, China and Russia projects the long shadow of imperialism on globalisation. As Theo D'haen points out, although globalisation is a contemporary phenomenon, there are thinkers who trace its origins back to

the spread of industrialisation and what Marx and Engels called 'bourgeois society' in the wake of European imperialism in approximately the middle of the 18th century. Yet others, such as the economic historian Immanuel Wallerstein, the cultural historian Tzvetan Todorov and the philosopher Jürgen Habermass, reach back as far as the Voyages of Discovery and the beginnings of European colonialism. (D'haen, 186)

D'haen's description of globalisation as an ongoing historical process determined by scientific progress that materialised in the development of European colonialism and imperialism, firmly situates its origins in the modern period. The development of empiricism, with its rejection of innate forms of knowledge and its conviction that all knowledge is derived from experience, gathered through the senses or reasoned by the brain, provided modern science with an aura of objectivity that was vital for the advancement of knowledge, but it also limited its scope to the observation of a reality constituted by independent events and things. This shortcoming was partially overcome by the parallel development of Newton's model of physics that assumes a mechanical and predictable universe. Newtonian mechanicism confirmed the perfectibility of science, reinforced the truthfulness and inevitability of universal history and facilitated the liberal humanist definition of the subject as an autonomous (white male) individual fighting for freedom against political, social and economic oppression by rational and scientific means (see Onega 2014, 491–96). From a political and economic perspective, the major factors contributing to the birth of globalisation were the American War of Independence (1775–1783) and the French Revolution, followed by the industrial revolution in the mid-

nineteenth century. During the reign of Louis XVI in France, the economic crisis caused in part by the cost of intervening in the American Revolution, dramatically increased by a regressive system of taxation and a series of poor harvests in the late 1780s, provoked the storming of the Bastille on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1789, the event that marks the beginning of the French Revolution and the end of the Old Regime. By then, the European countries were competing for the control of international trading routes and the construction of what Voltaire described as “the European republic of commercial states which has succeeded the wars of religion and the phantom of universal monarchy” (qtd. in Vogt 131). Enlightenment thinkers from Voltaire and Montesquieu to members of the Scottish Enlightenment like Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and John Miller envisioned the transition from the Old Regime to the rise of the new commercial society —*le doux commerce*— as the culmination of a long and painful historical process from barbarism to civilization evolving along a sequence of stages in humankind’s evolution (Vogt 133–34). According to these thinkers, the role of international commerce was to contribute to the eradication of barbarism by establishing mutually profitable and friendly relations with other civilised nations while respecting their different cultures. Thus Kant, in his treatise on *Perpetual Peace* (1795), argued for a model of global peace and tolerance based on an ideal of universal hospitality, mutual non-intrusion and respect for cultural differences. As Kant forcefully argued, this goal was jeopardised by the inhospitable behaviour of the “civilised” nations with the so-called barbarians, particularly the European commercial states, whose international policy was exclusively aimed at economic profit and imperialist expansion:

The injustice which they exhibit on visiting foreign lands and races—this being equivalent in their eyes to conquest—is such as to fill us with horror. America, the negro countries, the Spice Islands, the Cape etc. were, on being discovered, looked upon as countries which belonged to nobody; for the native inhabitants were reckoned as nothing. [...] Oppression of the natives followed, famine, insurrection, perfidy and all the rest of the litany of evils which can afflict mankind. (Kant 139–40)

Kant’s denunciation of the obnoxious treatment inflicted on foreign lands and races by the commercial states provides early evidence of the shift towards “biological or scientific racism” that culminated in the rise of Social Darwinism in the early or mid-nineteenth

century alongside the development of imperialism. As Brigitte Glaser explains, this “scientific” discourse, enhancing the struggle for survival and the purity, integrity, and superiority of their own race became the official doctrine of the centralised powers competing for colonial expansion and the construction of the modern state (Glaser 211). Here lies the economic, political and ideological foundation of globalisation. In the following section we will see the evolution of these ideas in the postmodernist period.

### **Anti-Imperialism and the Derealisation of Reality in the Postmodern Period**

Like modernity, the emergence of postmodernity in the late 1960s and 1970s is closely linked to scientific progress, in this case, the development of communications technology and the birth of the Information Society. In the early twentieth century, Newton’s mechanistic model of physics had already been challenged by Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity and the development of quantum mechanics by Niels Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg. Briefly stated, relativity theory problematises the results of empirical observation depending on the position of the observer, while quantum mechanics reveals matter to be less solid and definable than it appears to the senses (see Onega 2014, 296–97). This scientific paradigm shift is reflected in the configuration of postmodernist culture. Thus, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard famously defined the “*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv; original emphasis) and contended that postmodernity “refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (Lyotard xxv). Therefore, from Lyotard’s perspective, the challenge to be met is not to reach an overall consensus about democracy and capitalism ruling the world but, on the contrary—in consonance with Kant’s injunction to respect cultural differences—to undermine the already established consensual frameworks from within, so as to destabilise the dominant repressive order.

One of the earliest practitioners of this provocative mandate was Edward Said (1935–2003), the Palestinian-American professor of literature at Columbia University, amply recognised as the founder of postcolonial studies. While in *Orientalism* (1978), Said forcefully denounced the stereotypes and clichéd analytical models employed in the West to represent the so-called “Oriental World,” in a later work, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), he traced the roots of Eurocentric imperialism along two main axes: he established tightly interwoven links between Empire, geography and culture, and brought to the fore the countercultures of resistance and decolonisation threatened with erasure by the dominant order. Another significant contributor to this line of inquiry is that of the Indian

feminist philosopher and critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942). In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak deconstructs the supposed transparency of power relations in Western culture through an intersectional analysis of the theory of representation sustaining it and the political economy of global capitalism, before asking readers “to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe” (Spivak 1988, 280). In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Spivak moves away from postcolonial studies to her own philosophical and critical position, in order to expose the ideational and affective foreclosure of humanist ethics and project the (im)possible perspective of the “Native Informant,” an implicit imaginary reader who is, strictly speaking, unverifiable, that is, unknowable. Since the 1980s, the attempts of Said, Spivak and other postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha (b. 1949), to decentre the power relations between Western dominant culture and native otherness have been complemented by further theoretical developments aimed at by bringing to the fore other forms of marginality and otherness, such as Feminist Studies, Intersectional Studies, Queer Theory, Trauma Studies, Memory Studies, the Theory of Affect, the Theory of Resilience, the Theory of (Un)grievability, Eco-criticism and the Ethics of Care for and towards the Other (be it human, animal or inanimate things) (see Onega 2017, 373).

The emergence of postcolonial studies had a profound effect on the configuration of the Western literary canon, with writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, John Agard or Chinua Achebe conferring on it a deterritorialised and multicultural stance totally absent from canonical modernist writers like D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. The canonisation of ex-centric writers represents a positive alternative to the racist and patriarchal imperialist culture. However, the very fact that they were canonised at all also points to market economy as a determining factor, since their canonisation was made possible by the promotion campaigns launched by specialised media with worldwide coverage, like *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement* or *The New York Times*, in collaboration with prestigious awards such as the Man Booker Prize or the Nobel Prize for Literature. Similarly, the inclusion in the new canon of feminist and lesbian writers like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood or Jeanette Winterson was the result of the decision of mainstream publishers to create new imprints to cater for what was considered to be a new thriving market. Thus, for example, as Patricia Duncker notes, Pandora Press was “an imprint of a mainstream publisher, Routledge and Kegan Paul [which] had been set up in competition with the other feminist houses, Virago, Onlywomen, Sheba Feminist

Publishers and The Women's Press" (Duncker 77). In the long run, the use of the new technologies in the promotion of writers with a specific marketable profile has fostered the levelling of high and low culture. What is more, given the fact that most of the writers with a postcolonial background, including Abdulrazak Gurnah (b. 1948), the winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize, write in English and have a British or North-American education—like Said, Spivak, Bhabha and other postcolonial academics—it is difficult to know whether the deconstruction of the grand narratives of modernity demanded by Lyotard has really taken place, or whether, in fact, the new canon simply responds to the never-ending demand for new marketable commodities, and works, therefore, to reinforce the very capitalist structures that the marginal writers are expected to deconstruct. Madelena Gonzalez neatly expresses these doubts when she wonders whether the emergence of this "new canon or counter-canon" is not the product of "a new orthodoxy validating 'difference' and 'otherness', but which is also partly market-driven" and—as Graham Huggan argues in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001)—the product of "an interrelated network of economic factors, including the media and literary prizes" (Gonzalez para.4).

The intrinsic difficulty of establishing the relative positions of these writers and critics with respect to the Eurocentric dominant discourse in a clear-cut and unambiguous way begs for a further inquiry into the nature of postmodernist culture. In his immensely influential book, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989), David Harvey added a crucial element to Lyotard's notion of "the condition of postmodernity" when he contended that the intellectual thought, cultural trends, economic transformations, and political developments known as "postmodernism" decisively contributed to the rise of a widespread feeling that the values of modernity—its faith in human rationality, economic, political and social progress, reliance on science and technology, aesthetic coherence and ethical values—were being unhinged, and that humanity, especially in the West, was entering a new era. Thus, as Woodward and Jones III note, by historicising, locating and explaining postmodernism, Harvey established what Terry Eagleton acutely described as "the foundations of an apparently free-floating phenomenon" (Woodward and Jones III, 126). This description of postmodernism as unhinged and free-floating foreruns Zygmunt Bauman's distinction, in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), between modernity and postmodernity in terms of a dialectical move from what he calls "solid modernity" to "fluid modernity" (instead of "postmodernity"), premised on the ambivalent relationship between order and chaos.

Bauman's main contention is that "liquid" or "fluid" modernity is stripped of the rationalist delusions of order and embraces instead the contingent and ambivalent nature of modern life, thus denying the possibility of trusting or relying on that which would make the world predictable and therefore manageable (Bauman 3). In agreement with this, Bauman defines postmodernity as a state of mind in which one is acutely aware of the fluid and relative nature of social reality and modern identities (7). His definition of postmodernity echoes Jean Baudrillard's contention in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) that the development of information technology in our globalised capitalist society has led to the generation of a territory, a referential being, or a substance "by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1981, 1), and that, as he argues in *The Perfect Crime* (1995), our incapacity to distinguish the real from the virtual has generated a process of dehumanisation and derealisation of the Other that perpetuates a system of violence based on extreme love/hate relationships coupled with indifference and the mass attraction for atrocity exhibitions transmitted in real time by the media (Baudrillard 2002, 131–41).

Bauman's and Baudrillard's characterisation of postmodernity is echoed by postmodernist culture. In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1987), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that the mass culture produced under monopoly is identical everywhere and exerts a strong ideological impact all over the world; and that, thanks to the new media technologies and techniques, "[f]ilms and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce" (Horkheimer and Adorno 95). Their words echo Walter Benjamin's contention in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," that the mechanical reproduction of works of art, in the form of photographs or films, deprives them of the uniqueness and authenticity that situates them in the cultural tradition they belong to (223), provoking "the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (221), and predetermining the "individual reactions [according to] the mass audience response they are about to produce" (234).

Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* may be said to extend both Benjamin's and Adorno's insights by applying their ideas to the processes of commodification and reification underlying our globalised consumer culture, and extending the analytical corpus to a great variety of cultural productions, ranging from b-movies and the mass media to *Reader's Digest* culture, airport literature, science fiction and fantasy novels (Jameson 1991, 3). Jameson's main argument is that



postmodern art and aesthetics are characterised by depthlessness, the absence of historical context, spatio-temporal dissociation and a distinctive fragmentation of the subject that evinces a generalised “waning of affect” (1991, 10), that is, the transformation of the genuine emotions produced by authentic art into a caricature of itself based on the expectations of the mass audience. He illustrates the difference between modernist and postmodernist art by comparing Vincent Van Gogh’s painting “A Pair of Shoes” (1888) with Andy Warhol’s “Diamond Dust Shoes” (1989). While the first evokes a concrete historical context and the loneliness and hardship of agricultural labour and has, therefore, a social significance that is inseparable from the cultural heritage it helps to construct, the second is, according to Jameson, a decontextualised and fetishized commodity object (Jameson 1991, 7), expressing the reified social relations of the postmodern age (1991, 6–9). By the same token, Jameson sets Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” (1893), with its *topoi* of “alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation” (Jameson 1991, 11) expressing the existential anxiety of an age on the brink of extinction, against the stylised pastiches of authentic pieces of art intentionally created by Warhol as mass produced commodity fetishes responding to the predetermined demands and expectations of the mass audience, such as brightly coloured shoes, poppies, Campbell soup cans or media stars like Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe or Jackie Kennedy (1991, 9).

In *The Return of the Real* (1996), Hal Foster adds a significant element to Jameson’s theory of the waning of affects in postmodernist culture when, echoing Baudrillard, he argues that, beneath the glamorous surface of Andy Warhol’s commodity fetishes and media stars, there lurks a reality of death and tragedy that prompts “the straightforward expression of feeling” (Foster 130); and that his famous *dictum* “I want to be a machine” in fact “may point less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defence against this shock” (130-131). According to Foster, Warhol’s art should be interpreted in terms of Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion, both “as a draining of significance and a defending against affect” (131). What is more, as Foster contends,

Warhol’s repetitions not only reproduce traumatic effects: they also *produce* them. Somehow in these repetitions, then, several contradictory things occur at the same time: a warding away of traumatic significance and an opening out to it, a defending against traumatic affect and a producing of it. (132; emphasis added)

While the ambivalent effect detected by Foster in Warhol's apparently emotionally flat, simulacral pictures adds a traumatic component to postmodernist art and culture, it also reinforces Bauman's argument of the fluidity, instability and allegiance to chaos of postmodernity, an age that emerged out of a radical break with the dominant modernist culture and aesthetics, at that key social and economic moment, "which has variously been called media society, the 'society of the spectacle' (Guy Debord), consumer society, the 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption' (Henri Lefebvre), or the 'postindustrial society' (Daniel Bell)." (Jameson 1984, vii).

Jameson's definition of postmodernist culture and aesthetics as an emotionally troubled and inauthentic (or simulacral) product, aimed at satisfying the predetermined demands of a mass consumer society unhinged from its cultural heritage, constitutes perhaps the clearest example of the adverse effects of the economic and technological imperialism exerted by the United States on a global scale through the Hollywood film industry and other market-oriented media corporations with the technological capacity to multiply and distribute their products and slogans worldwide. Madelena Gonzalez offers two telling examples of the overriding power of these mass media over the cultural construction of reality in the consumer society: the family model promoted by "The United Colours of Benetton" and fusion cooking. In her own words:

If advertising is to be believed, we are all one big happy family, black, brown, yellow and white, revelling equally in the joys of consumer capitalism, presented iconically as a great social leveller. In the same way that the craze for fusion cooking and restaurants creates the illusion that the world is our oyster whose succulent flesh is available at the flick of a fork to satisfy the jaded palates of 'foodies' from Islington to L.A., the myth of the multicultural promotes the idea of a post-Internationale internationalism where we all sit down to sup at the global banquet. (Gonzalez para 1)

After thus comparing the effect of these family and food metaphors with what she describes as "the myth of multiculturalism," Gonzalez goes on to reflect on the emergence of world literature in the twenty-first century. As she argues, the "[s]uccessive appellations for fiction with its roots either outside, or marginal within, the imperial

centres of the British Isles and North America have now been superseded by the evocative ‘world’ label, reminding the potential consumer [...] that we are, after all, supposed to be living in a global village.” (Gonzalez para. 2). Thus, as Gonzales polemically asserts,

By dropping the adjective ‘Third’ from World Literature, it has been possible to forget the contestatory roots of writers originating outside, or situated marginally within, Western metropolitan centres and thus to recuperate difference as part of a marketable cultural commodity. For some this is the sign that ‘World Literature’ is really ‘World Bank Literature’, so little resistance does it offer to life under the auspices of the World Bank and the IMF. (Madelena Gonzalez para. 2)

## **Conclusion**

Gonzalez’s description of world literature as a marketable cultural commodity primarily aimed at commercial success and the erasure of the very cultural differences that postcolonial and multicultural writers and critics are at pains to foreground, implicitly points to the exhaustion of the postmodern paradigm. The Spanish philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez Magda suggests as much when she argues that, after deconstructing modernity’s grand narratives and creating its own narratives of multiplicity, liminality and fracture, postmodernity has fallen prey to the opposed impulse to put together and globally join the scattered pieces of the grand narratives, thus facilitating the creation of “a new Grand Narrative: Globalization” (2004, 28), or “the Great Fact of Globalization” (2017, n.p.). As pointed out elsewhere,

Her main contention is that the constant presence of flux and connectivity of our present Information Society fosters an emerging process of totality that, rather than hierarchical or pyramidal, follows a network-like model devoid of clear organisation or any hegemonic centre; and that this fluid, interconnected, unstable social reality begs for a similarly fluid, “transborder” mode of thinking (2004, 30), capable of responding to the gnoseological demands made by an era of swift transformations and fluidity in which water-tight boxes no longer make sense and everything functions as long as it is interconnected. (Onega and Ganteau 1–2)

As Rodriguez Magda notes, the exponential development of the new technologies allow us to witness phenomena occurring simultaneously in many places at the same time (2004, 31), thus transforming reality into a commodified, unstable and chaotic hyperreal experience. Her observation echoes not only Baudrillard's contention that we live in an age of simulacra and simulation, or in Bauman's terms, in "liquid modernity," but also Bauman's contention, in *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1999), that our market-oriented, globalised world has reached the end of geography. According to Bauman, life after geography is profoundly unsettling because, while corporations move where and when they wish, the traditional world of familiar physical space, of local businesses, stable relationships, and face-to face public communication, is collapsing all across Western civilization. As such, life becomes a life without *Sicherheit*, a German word that signifies safety, security, and certainty.

Confronted with the fluidity, instability and lack of safety, security and certainty of our globalised and hyperreal world, Rodriguez Magda's contention that we are presently witnessing a paradigm shift from postmodernity to transmodernity acquires increasing significance. At present, a growing number of thinkers from various fields of knowledge concur in describing transmodernity as a regenerative epistemological shift involving the development of a new relational global consciousness based on empathy (Rifkin) and an ethics of love (hooks), and requiring the transformation of monopoly economy into a partnership model of caring economics (Eisler), aimed at developing a new "planetary," "postpatriarchal" and "postsecular" conception of self and world, "in which humans are beginning to realize that we are all (including plants and animals) connected into one system, which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community" (Ateljevic 2003; see also Ganteau and Onega).

From this transmodern perspective, the question that remains to be answered is not whether the economic, political and cultural imperialism exerted at present by the United States will be replaced by Chinese or Russian imperialism, or whether, if they destroy each other in a nuclear confrontation, we will survive to be ruled by a yet unknown, new imperialist power. Rather, the vital question to be answered is, in Jeremy Rifkin's optimistic words: "Can we reach global empathy in time to avoid the collapse of civilization and save the Earth?" (3).

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