

“Image, Music, Text”: Elvis Presley as a Postmodern, Semiotic Construct

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Summary

Peter Whitmer has written that around the world the names Jesus, Coke and Elvis are the “only three words that need no translation to convey their meaning” (Whitmer 1996: x). Even in a multicultural South Africa, in the year 2008, the image of an Elvis impersonator was used to market a series of rollerball pens for no other reason than they come in a variety of colours redolent of the ersatz emeralds and sapphires on the singer’s jumpsuit (*Sunday Times Magazine*, 25 May 2008, n.p.)! Elvis Presley, arguably the greatest solo pop idol of the twentieth century and certainly the most recognisable and ubiquitous semiotic marker in American cultural history, embodies the quintessence of “the postmodern condition” (Lyotard). Thirty years after his death – 16 August 2007 marking that epochal moment – Presley’s image remains a powerful signifier of the exuberance of post-World-War-Two youth and culture, not only in the West, but worldwide. Drawing on the work of poststructuralist thinkers such as Barthes and cultural theorists such as Simon Frith, Steven Connor and Dick Hebdige, this article explores the mystique of the Elvis image as a postmodern, semiotic text. In crossing the liminal zone between black R & B and white country and western music, Presley, a white southerner, negotiates a fluid, performative identity that characterises the hybrid nature of the rock genre itself.

Opsomming

Volgens Peter Whitmer (1996: x) is die name Jesus, Coke en Elvis die “enigste drie woorde (regoor die wêreld) wat geen vertaling nodig het om hul betekenis oor te dra nie”. Selfs in ’n multikulturele Suid-Afrika, in die jaar 2008, is die beeld van ’n nabootser van Elvis gebruik om ’n reeks rolpuntpenne te bemark bloot omdat dit beskikbaar is in ’n verskeidenheid kleure wat herinner aan die kunsmatige smaragde en saffiere op die sanger se eenstukpak (*Sunday Times Magazine*, 25 May 2008, n.p.)! Elvis Presley, ongetwyfeld die grootste solo popheldfiguur van die twintigste eeu en beslis die mees erkende en ook alomteenwoordige semiotiese baken in die Amerikaanse kulturele geskiedenis, verpersoonlik die essensie van “die postmoderne stand” (Lyotard). Dertig jaar ná sy dood – 16 Augustus 2007 wat daardie besonder gewigtige oomblik gedenk – bly Presley se beeld ’n sterk aanduiding van die uitbundigheid van die post-Tweede-Wêreldoorlog jeug en kultuur, nie alleen in die Weste nie, maar ook wêreldwyd. Deur gebruik te maak van die werk van post-strukturalistiese denkers soos Barthes en kulturele teoretici soos Simon Frith,

Steven Connor en Dick Hebdige, verken hierdie artikel die mistieke simbool van die Elvisbeeld as 'n postmoderne, semiotiese teks. Deur die grens tussen swart R & B en wit countrymusiek oor te steek, bewerkstellig Elvis, 'n wit suiderling, 'n vloeibare performatiewe identiteit wat die hibriede aard van die rock genre in wese kenmerk.

... Elvis was one of the most photogenic individuals who ever lived In the intervening years since 1995 [first edition] the man's image has remained indelible and his home has been named a national landmark.

(Sullivan [1995]2007: 9)

Terms such as modernism, postmodernism and postmodernity, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, mean different things to different people. In taking issue with Fredric Jameson's notion of the postmodern as being a systemic form of capitalism, she views postmodernism as a name given to "cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it" (Hutcheon 1989: 25). In the domain of popular culture, as opposed to high culture such as art, classical music, literature and architecture, there is no discernable modernist period as such. Steven Connor draws attention to this anomaly: "Many of these popular forms and practices have a claim to be representatively postmodern in themselves, even though they may be forms and practices which never passed through any recognizably modernist phase. Such forms apparently do not need the legitimation of postmodern theory to enjoy their postmodern status". ([1989]1997: 205)

Rock music as a postmodern cultural phenomenon only begins to be taken seriously from the 1960s, the era of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, who, according to Jameson, represent the high-modernist moment of rock (Jameson 1984: 54). If the 1960s represent the high-modernist point of rock 'n' roll, then the 1950s is the precursor of that moment for it was during this decade that the architects of rock music, people like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston – all members of America's black minority population – carved their niche on the edifice of the rock genre. There is consensus among rock theorists that the protorock song was "Rocket 88" (inspired by the famous Oldsmobile with a Rocket V8 engine) recorded in 1951 by Jackie Brenston with Ike Turner's band at the Sun Recording Studio on Union Street in Memphis, Tennessee. This fact is audio-visually documented among the exhibits in Sam Phillips's Sun Recording Studio which has been declared a national heritage site. In that same studio three years later, an aspirant white gospel and ballad singer named Elvis Presley, recorded his first regional hit, "That's All Right Mama" (1954), and the rest, as they say, is history. Roger Osborne, a historian, writes: "Through Elvis Presley, a white southerner steeped in gospel and race music, black music hit the heart of white America. Rock

and Roll music, and the international stardom of Presley, was to form the vanguard for the spread of American culture around the world” (Osborne [2006]2007: 466-467).

It was due to the postmodern technologies of radio, television and cinema, in the aftermath of World War Two, that the popularity of Elvis Presley reached an international audience and marked the beginning of many historic achievements for Presley in the annals of popular music. Carl Belz, in his 1969 study *The Story of Rock*, testifies to this making of history:

He was the first rock artist to establish a continuing and independent motion picture career, the first to have a whole series of million-selling single records ... and the first to dominate consistently the tastes of the foreign record market, especially in England, where popularity polls listed him among the top favourites for each year until the arrival of the Beatles.

(Belz 1969: 38-40; p. 39 taken up by photo)

Modern literary theory is indebted to Roland Barthes for his enabling insights into the artefacts of popular culture. Deploying Ferdinand de Saussure’s term “semiology”, he subjects a host of modern cultural products to scrutiny – from literature to fashion, cuisine, music, photography and film (*Elements of Semiology* [1964, English translation 1967]). In a later project, *Camera Lucida*, which focuses on photography, he writes: “The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand ‘it is not there,’ on the other ‘but it has indeed been’): a mad image, chafed by reality” (Barthes [1980] 1981: 115). Simon Frith writes: “[T]wentieth-century entertainment is tied up with the use of photography, the phonograph, the film camera and the wireless, the TV, the video and the personal computer. In common-sense terms, indeed, the technology *is* the entertainment ...” (Frith [1991] 2000: 204). On the subject of talent, Frith says, “First, all entertainment businesses are organized around the idea of stardom. The star is central to the entertainment market, most obviously in the figures of the film and pop star ...” (p. 205). The trajectory of Elvis Presley’s career, from that of an obscure truck driver to international superstar, witnessed his manager and the record companies explore and exploit every medium, or semiological signifier – from the phonograph and the filmic image, to the live stage performances which responded to the desire of his fans for the real body of the star (the somatic) rather than the “simulacra and simulations” (Baudrillard) of his musical production.

According to Steven Connor, “the success of the rock industry depends upon the kinds of desire that high-fidelity reproduction stimulates, the itch for more, and for more faithful reproductions of the *real thing*, the yearning to move ever closer to the *original*” (Connor [1989]1997: 17). In his quest to secure his star’s popularity (and his own bank balance), the bogus

"Colonel" Tom Parker, Presley's manager, combined the visual and the auditory with the singer's corporeal image, which was taken to every household that could afford a television set – the latest "modcon" of 1950s America. It was through the influential TV performances that Presley's early somatic presence was relayed to homes in America. On 9 September 1956 when Elvis made his first appearance on the influential Ed Sullivan Show, the event was hosted by the distinguished actor Charles Laughton because Ed Sullivan was in hospital recovering from a car accident. Elvis and the Jordanaires performed not in the Sullivan studio in New York but from Hollywood on the West Coast. After Presley's energetic rendition of "Ready, Teddy", the cynical Laughton, back in the New York studio, was seen wiping away a tear from his eye! Such was the impact of the twenty-one-year-old singer on the elderly Laughton. Twelve years later, in 1968, when the star's musical career was in the doldrums, his manager once again exploited the medium of TV to bring his star corporeally to his audience. This was the famous NBC-TV Special which reintroduced the old Elvis to a new generation of youth. In 1973, history was once again in the making when the performer appeared on stage in Hawaii. The show, titled "Elvis: Aloha from Hawaii", was relayed across the globe via satellite. It was watched by over a billion people in 40 countries, making television history. Regarded by some highbrow academics as southern white trash (Albert Goldman, for example, refers to his "redneck roots" (Goldman [1981]1982: 74), Presley nevertheless attained unprecedented stardom. Like Shakespeare, Elvis was not of an age or era, or country, but has become a benchmark for succeeding generations of rock stars. Here, for example, is a news report on the female superstar Madonna as she turned 50 in 2008: "That's right, The Material Girl ... has more Top 10 singles than Elvis". (*Sunday Times*, August 10, 2008: 3)

One of the strongest semiological gestures to canonise the image of Presley as an American cultural icon was the 1993 official United States postage stamp, the largest-selling stamp in the US to date. According to Marjorie Garber (1998: 18), a 72-year-old Vermont woman had written to the Postmaster General almost every week since Elvis's death pushing for a commemorative stamp. Garber reports that when the stamp was released, thus "declaring Elvis dead, as well as transcendent", the woman said, "I can't imagine anybody more deserving to be put on a stamp than my Elvis He was a great man, a great American. I knew that the first time I laid eyes on him in that black leather suit" (p. 18).



The 1993 US Postage Stamp

www.usps.com/communications/news/stamps/2006/sr06_055.htm

The stamp incorporates an early photographic image of the entertainer, bearing those features that have become stereotypical: a figure in a brightly coloured jacket, with curled lips, long sideburns and jet-black hair, clutching – almost making love to – a 1950s model microphone. The American populace had voted for an early image of the singer instead of the 1970s Las Vegas Elvis. The jet-black hair is, of course, the ultimate semiological manipulation which Presley himself inaugurated and diligently maintained throughout his professional life. Jerry Schilling, a member of the singer's entourage known as the Memphis Mafia, describes Elvis's natural hair, like his father's, as "sandy brown" (Schilling 2006: 19).

Steven Connor observes: "Along with the fashion industry, the rock industry is the best example of the elastic saleability of the cultural past, with its regular recycling of its own history in the form of revivals and remakes, comebacks and cover-versions". (Connor [1989]1997: 206) One marketing strategy that coincided with the 25th anniversary of the death of Elvis was the re-release of the song "A Little Less Conversation", which featured in a B-grade Elvis movie, namely, "Live a Little, Love a Little" made in 1968. The recording, a remix by a Dutch DJ, Tom Holkenborg (aka JXL), bookmarks an important page in the Elvis recording archive, and indeed in the history of popular music. For several decades Elvis had shared with the Beatles the unique achievement of having had seventeen number-one hits on the UK charts. With the postmodernist reprise of the earlier song, Elvis now surpassed the Fab Four, with a record of eighteen on the UK charts. It is ironic, if not bizarre, that a re-release of an obscure recording by a dead star should rewrite the record books. What Steven Connor says about the phenomenon of rock and the use it makes of modern technology, is pertinent to the circumstances surrounding the song "A Little Less Conversation": "In recent years the development of new forms of technology has accelerated and to some degree democratized this process, to the point where the cultural evidence of rock music can be physically

dismantled and reassembled in the form of pastiche and collage, much more quickly and uncontrollably than ever before". (Connor [1989]1997: 206-207)

As a postmodernist strategy, the use of pastiche, mimicry and collage as semiotic categories is central to the perpetuation of the Elvis mystique and mythography. The cultural critic Dick Hebdige avers:

To say that Elvis was a mimic is not to diminish his talent or his achievement. The fact that he could do a perfect imitation of Dean Martin crooning a Neapolitan love song or Arthur Crudup shouting out a gutsy blues or Hank Williams whining his way through some tortured cowboy lament didn't stop him making his own style by blending all the other styles together. He could borrow different voices, different styles at different times and in the process he created something of his own.

(Hebdige 1987: xiv)

The central subject of Hebdige's study is not Elvis, but Caribbean music which relies on what he calls "versioning". Elvis, according to Hebdige, did his own versioning of Dean Martin, Arthur Crudup and Hank Williams. As in life, so in death, the modalities of pastiche, collage and mimicry have sustained the aura of the singer. No other entertainer has inspired as many impersonators, both visual (look-alikes) and vocal (sound-alikes) as the King of Rock has done. Indeed, it would be true to say that the singer's image and posthumous career live on vicariously through his legions of impersonators. In South Africa we have witnessed this periodically when overseas and local impersonators have taken us down memory lane. It would be true to say that in the South African musical imaginary, the sign of Presley is inscribed mainly as pastiche and caricature, both drawing on the image of the Las Vegas singer in his sunglasses and high-collared jumpsuit. Here is an excerpt from a theatre review of a show titled "Elvis Presley: The Wonder of You" staged at the Guild Theatre in East London (South Africa) in March 2008:

It shook, rattled and rolled my stoic perception of Elvis as being a white male with dark hair and a funky smile. Let me explain. Although former Idols contestant Rory McLaren did the main Elvis songs, each member of the backing band got a chance to do their version of the "King's" greatest hits Of course the singers wore the appropriate attire as well. There was the golden [lamé] jacket, the comeback special black leather suit and the flamboyant Las Vegas-era suits.

(van Zyl 2008: 12)

This generic, or stereotypical image of the singer is so ubiquitous in South Africa that one wonders whether its general populace, especially the younger generation, know the real Elvis from the ersatz one – a case in point being the use of an impersonator's image in the *Sunday Times*

Magazine (25 May 2008, unpaginated) to sell the Pilot G-2 rollerball pens. Even a few senior academics looked surprised when I pointed out the fake “Elvis” image at a conference at Pretoria University in 2008 convened by the English Academy of Southern Africa. This generic image has featured in other places too, such as an ad for the Internet Company, MWeb, on SABC2 channel in July 2007. At the time of revising this essay (2010), South Africa’s national airline SAA still features the image of Elvis at the end of their videoed safety instructions. The humorous element in the video is the wide-eyed wonderment of the toddler looking at this Elvis impersonator rocking to the music on his i-Pod.

In his controversial, if not scurrilous biography published a few years after the singer’s death, Albert Goldman writes:

Elvis received his title, King of Rock ’n’ Roll, as early in life and with the same sense of divine right as any hereditary monarch An American king, Elvis saw his empire extend around the globe, until it comprised even the remotest regions, the most exotic peoples. In fact, he inspired even greater enthusiasm and awe in other countries than he did at home because foreigners did not recognize any faults in his title

(Goldman [1981]1982: 14)

Notwithstanding Goldman’s vitriol which permeates his tendentious study, there is an essential truth that emerges from his sustained metaphor about Elvis the monarch and his foreign empire. Elvis’s empire did indeed extend from remote islands in the Pacific to places in so-called darkest Africa, and from India to Japan. One hugely important conquest was India as evidenced in the career of the Indian film star, Shammi Kapoor. Shammi, a member of the Kapoor dynasty in what is today known as the “Bollywood” Hindi film industry, enjoyed a long and varied career beginning in the 1950s when he was the hero of popular romantic dramas. In his heyday, Shammi Kapoor was dubbed the Elvis Presley of India. According to one source, “[the] one most powerful influence on Shammi aside from Western music was Elvis Presley. In the suggestiveness of his song-dance routines, [and] in the curl of his lip ... Shammi Kapoor brought the American king of rock to Indian cinema” (Shammi Kapoor). It is ironic that the Indian movie industry thought it fit to reinscribe the image of Elvis into its cinematic text at a time when India vigorously resisted the importation of Jack Daniels and Coca Cola – iconic symbols of American globalisation. Shammi Kapoor went on to reprise the image of Presley in two of his defining films, notably “Dil Deke Dekho” (1959) and “Jungle” (1961). In the former, a black-and-white movie, a few bars of “Baby I don’t Care” are sung a cappella by a group of teenagers doing the rock ’n’ roll dance. Moviegoers would have been reminded of the film “Jailhouse Rock” (1957) in which Elvis sings the song. By 1961, when Indian cinematography was enhanced by technicolor, Shammi would transpose the image of Presley in one of his song-and-dance

routines in "Jungle", wearing the trademark gold lamé suit donned by the singer in his early performances.



Shammi Kapoor, the Indian Elvis

<http://in.movies.yahoo.com/artists/Shammi-Kapoor/artiststills/slideshow-13718-16248.html>

From Indian cinematography in the 1950s and 1960s, the image of Elvis has transposed itself in a literary text in Africa. Published in 2004, the novel *Graceland* by the Nigerian writer Chris Abani features a sixteen-year-old protagonist named Elvis. If "Graceland" and "Elvis" signify glamour and success, then Abani has used these signifiers in an ironic way to depict the underbelly of the city of Lagos and a boy's dreams of becoming like his idol, Elvis. Here is Chris Abani's young protagonist, an Elvis impersonator who dances to tourists to support himself and his widowed father: "He cleared his throat, counted 'One, two, three.' then began to sing 'Hound Dog' off-key. At the same time, he launched into his dance routine. It built up slowly. One leg sort of snapping at the knee, then the pelvis thrust, the arm dangling at his side becoming animated, forefinger and thumb snapping out the time". (Abani 2004: 12)

The world of the singer Elvis Presley, actualised in the striking title of the novel, has ironic resonances throughout the text. Replete with images from American popular culture (John Wayne, Clint Eastwood) the harsh underworld of Lagos is softened by the music of Presley: "From the house came the quiet protest of Elvis Presley's 'Return to Sender' played at a low volume" (Abani 2004: 18). Other song titles in the novel redolent of the singer's meteoric rise to stardom include "Heartbreak Hotel" (p. 77), "Jailhouse Rock" (p. 78) and "Suspicious Minds" (p. 317). All these songs from Presley's vast discography are instantly recognisable as they once occupied Number 1 positions on the Billboards of either the USA or UK, or both countries simultaneously. Besides the central figure of the protagonist, Elvis, two other names signify the glamorous world of the King of Rock 'n' Roll. One is "The King", whose full title is "King of the Beggars", and the

other is “the Colonel”, the corrupt, ruthless head of security who traffics in human body parts and child slavery. The latter is killed by “The King” during a protest action which turns violent. Towards the end of the novel, as Elvis is sitting in the airport lounge waiting for his flight to America, he is “still haunted by the spectre of the Colonel” (p. 319). By transposing the signifier of Elvis Presley’s real-life manager, Colonel Tom Parker, to his novel, Chris Abani has provided yet another ironic counterpoint: the Colonel of the novel claims he is an authentic Colonel, while Presley’s manager, Colonel Tom Parker, who also claimed to be a “Colonel”, was an illegal Dutch immigrant in the USA. The irony deepens when one considers that Colonel Tom Parker, who was largely responsible for Elvis Presley’s material success, did not always act in the singer’s best artistic interests. The Elvis of the novel *Graceland* is given the chance of going abroad to America, but the real Elvis Presley never performed outside North America because the shrewd Colonel, mindful of his own illegal status, was reluctant to go abroad for reasons best left to speculation.

For a serious novelist from Africa to entitle his book “Graceland” and name his young hero “Elvis”, 27 years after the death of the original Elvis, speaks volumes about the signature of the Elvis image as a semiotic text worldwide. That Elvis’s image should find its way into an African novel is not surprising, considering that commemorative postage stamps have been issued periodically in places such as Ghana, Senegal, Angola, the Ivory Coast and Mali (Elvis International Postage Stamps).

Extrapolating from Roman Jakobson’s notion of the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language, Fiske and Hartley state: “While metaphor works by association and similarity, metonymy functions in a contiguous relationship between the sign and the signified, such as ‘the crown’ which is also a metonymic sign for sovereignty”. (Fiske & Hartley [1978]2003: 32) According to *TIME* magazine (29 May 2006: 20), it is estimated that 600 000 people visit Graceland annually, making it the second most visited residence in the US after the White House. The signifier Graceland functions metonymically as the other signifier, the White House does – by association and contiguity. Graceland, which has been declared a national monument, stands for Elvis just as the White House stands for the President of the US. In 2006, Graceland, or Elvis if you prefer, made world news when it was announced that the reigning Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi would be touring Graceland with the US President, George W. Bush. It would seem that just as Elvis was the bridge between two culturally diverse nations, America and India, he would once again preside over the cultural melding of an Eastern and a Western nation that once went to war with each other. *The New York Times* of 1 July reported the event which took place on 30 June 2006. The caption read, “In Memphis, Two Heads of Government Visit the Home of Rock ‘n’ Roll Royalty” (Stolberg & Dewan). The Japanese Prime Minister, a great Elvis aficionado who also

shares Elvis's birth date, is reported to have said "It's like a dream" when he entered the Jungle Room. When Priscilla Presley pointed out the oversize gold-rimmed sunglasses once worn by "The King", the Prime Minister eagerly donned them, "thrusting his hips and arms forward in an imitation of a classic Elvis move", much to the amusement of Lisa Marie, Priscilla and Bush. The report went on say that Koizumi's obsession with the singer is well known, and that it was he who was instrumental in erecting, in the 1980s, a bronze statue of Elvis in Tokyo.

The image of the 1970s stage performer was quite different from the guitar-playing Hillbilly Cat of the early 1950s. Carl Belz comments: "In his early career, Elvis Presley forcefully presented the image of a singer with his guitar. Like his folk predecessors, and like Bill Haley and his Comets, he was a symbol of the autonomous musician" (Belz 1969: 43-44). The later image of the singer would draw on a vast array of accoutrements, not excluding a costume that would resonate with the star-spangled banner of his country. Patsy Guy Hammontree refers to two dimensions that Elvis incorporated into his stage performances. One was the use of Richard Strauss's "Also Sprache Zarathustra", the music from the film "2001: A Space Odyssey". Strauss refers to Zarathustra, a Persian prophet who founded a new religion in the sixth century BC, to suggest a powerful, spiritual figure. The rousing drumbeats of the music create a tense, electric atmosphere of anticipation as "The King" enters the stage. The other dimension identified by Hammontree was the use of a cape. Reminding us that the cape was worn by the likes of Lord Byron and Edgar Allan Poe, not to mention Superman, Hammontree writes: "[S]triding on to the stage to the histrionic Strauss music, cape floating behind him, Elvis became a powerful visual icon". (Hammontree 1985: 75)

That a sign can evoke diametrically opposed reactions in the reader or viewer is acknowledged by Roland Barthes: "... there remains the problem of ideological ... or ethical connotation, that which introduces reasons or values into the reading of image" (Barthes 1977: 29). After the Milton Berle Show on 5 June 1956, Elvis was excoriated by some members of the press for his vulgar style. Peter Guralnick writes: "It seemed as if all the pent-up forces of puritanism and repression had been unleashed simultaneously to discover in rock 'n' roll the principal source of America's growing moral decadence and the world's ills" (Guralnick 1994: 287). One New York policeman, alluding to Elvis's trademark gyrations, is reported to have said, "If he did that on the street we'd arrest him" (Kretzmer 1957: 58). Roland Barthes has reminded us that apart from the ethical dimension in the reading of a sign, there is also the historical dimension that has to be considered. A generation or so after the outcry over Presley's somatic gestures, one hardly bats an eyelid when viewing images of the late, crotch-hugging Michael Jackson.

Posthumously, Elvis's career lives on in the vast international semiotic network that keeps his image alive, if not profitable – thanks to what Walter

Benjamin has termed the “age of mechanical reproduction” (Benjamin [1998]2004: 1235-1241). According to the magazine *Forbes Annual Top-earning Dead Celebrities* in 2007, Elvis was at the top of the list of 13, with earnings of \$49 million, followed by John Lennon at \$44 million. Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, whose images are synonymous with Elvis’s in the pantheon of American icons, came ninth and thirteenth respectively, with a paltry \$7 million and \$3.5 million (*Forbes Annual Top Earning Dead Celebrities*). A report in the *International Herald Tribune: Europe* (21 October 2007) suggests that there is a growing demand for Elvis paraphernalia in Europe. In Paris, there is The Elvis My Happiness boutique which specialises in Elvis merchandise – from records to books, posters and figurines. While Elvistics in the United States are satisfied with impersonators, their European counterparts prefer some degree of authenticity. For this reason, Elvis’s septuagenarian backup bands enjoyed a successful tour of Sweden and Paris in 2007. In England, a reissue of Elvis’s “A Big Hunk of Love” went on to No.12 on the BBC’s Top 40 singles, behind “50 Cent” and “Sugababes”, the current pop icons. One Elvis fan-club owner in Belgium is reported to have said: “One of the reasons that Elvis is so popular is the fact that he’s never been here before and he’s still a mystery. Another explanation is that Elvis is a universal icon who touches so many different people from all parts of society. He’s everything: the rebel, the crooner and the actor”. (*International Herald Tribune: Europe*)

The sign of Elvis Presley is imbricated in the postmodern world of recording, DVDs, television, film, photography and even kitsch architecture. In the province of Mpumalanga (South Africa), about a two-hour drive from Johannesburg, is a hotel and casino complex named Graceland. Its colonnaded façade is redolent of the original edifice in Memphis. One of the photos displayed in the foyer of the hotel is that of Elvis and Muhamed Ali, both in karate suits, sparring playfully. The photographic image of Elvis “The King” with his guest Muhamed Ali “The Greatest” boxer of all time, signifies the immense power and stature that one mortal could command not only during his lifetime but beyond. It is an impression that is reinforced by the much-hyped picture of Elvis with the former President of the USA, Richard Nixon, when the singer, in a highly deluded state, visited the White House on 21 December 1970 to request the President to confer on him the title of Federal Agent-at-Large in the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. (I’m not saying anything, okay?)

“Elvis” may be regarded as a postmodern sign that replicates itself in the cultural life of the late twentieth, early twenty-first century, as instanced in songs such as “Graceland” by Paul Simon, or “Walking in Memphis” by Marc Cohn, or the lyrics of “That Don’t Impress Me Much” by the female rocker Shania Twain. In this song, addressed to an egotistical male subject, Twain asks, “You think you’re Elvis or something?” (Universal Records, 1999). Elvis inscribes the universal dream for success, at the same time

reminding us of the vulnerability of such monumental talent that fails to negotiate the perilous byways of stardom, money and their inevitable temptations such as sex and drugs (prescription or otherwise).

Fortuitously, the year 2010 (when this essay comes under academic eyes for scrutiny) marks the 75th anniversary of Elvis Presley's birth (on 8 January 1935). To celebrate this occasion, the Smithsonian Institution has mounted exhibitions in Washington and Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, the Grammy Museum features a photographic exhibition titled "Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer". Wertheimer has been immortalised as the photojournalist who captured the young star at various moments, even some intimate ones, during his nascent career. The exhibition in Washington "is devoted to the influence of Presley's image after his death. It features a gold bust of Elvis as Julius Caesar [Hear! Hear!] and a 1993 stamp with his likeness that became the most popular US postal stamp" (Sapa-AP). It would seem that the Elvis semiotic archive is inexhaustible. How one reads the sign of "Elvis", remains, of course, arbitrary.

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