

39

Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation

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Both the new 'Caribbean cinema', which has now joined the company of the other 'Third Cinemas', and the emerging cinemas of Afro-Caribbean blacks in the 'diasporas' of the West, put the issue of cultural identity in question. Who is this emergent, new subject of the cinema? From where does it speak? The practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of *enunciation*. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. But this view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim.

In this paper, then, I seek to open a dialogue, an investigation, on the subject of cultural identity and cinematic representation. The 'I' who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, 'enunciated'. We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*. I was born into and spent my childhood and adolescence in a lower-middle class family in Jamaica. I have lived all my adult life in England, in the shadow of the black diaspora – 'in the belly of the beast'. I write against the background of a lifetime's work in cultural studies. If the paper seems preoccupied with the diaspora experience and its narratives of dis-placement, it is worth remembering that all discourse is 'placed', and the heart has its reasons.

There are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more

superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of 'Caribbeaness'. It is this identity which a Caribbean cinema must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation.

Such a conception of cultural or national identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world. It lay at the centre of the vision of the poets of 'Negritude', like Aimée Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, and of the Pan-African political project, earlier in the century. It continues to be a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalized peoples. In post-colonial societies, the rediscovery of this identity is often the object of what Frantz Fanon once called a 'passionate research... directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others.' New forms of cultural practice in these societies address themselves to this project for the very good reason that, as Fanon puts it, in the recent past, 'Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it' (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 'On National Culture').

The question which Fanon's observation poses is, what is the nature of this 'profound research' which drives the new forms of visual and cinematic representation? Is it only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite different practice entailed – not the rediscovery but the *production* of identity? Not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past?

We cannot and should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery. 'Hidden histories' have played a critical role in the emergence of some of the most important social movements of our time. The photographic work of a visual artist like Armet Francis, a Jamaican-born photographer who has lived in Britain since the age of eight, is a testimony to the continuing creative power of this conception of identity within the practices of representation. His photographs of the peoples of The Black Triangle, taken in Africa, the Caribbean, the US and the UK, attempt to reconstruct in visual terms 'the underlying unity of the black people whom, colonization and slavery distributed across the African diaspora.' His text is an act of imaginary re-unification.

Crucially, his images find a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas. He does this by representing or 'figuring' Africa as the mother of these different civilizations. His Triangle is, after all, 'centred' in Africa. Africa is the name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked. No one who looks at these textual images now, in the light of the history of transportation, slavery and migration, can fail to understand how the rift of separation, the 'loss of identity', which has been integral to the Caribbean experience only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place. Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation of the West.

There is, however, a related but different view of cultural identity, which qualifies, even if it does not replace, the first. This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are': or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side – the differences and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the truly traumatic character of 'the colonial experience'. The ways we have been positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization, precisely because they were not superficial. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, 'power/knowledge'. And this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to place some person or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to

the norm. That is the lesson – the sombre majesty – of Fanon's insight into the colonizing experience in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

This expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted, they produce, in Fanon's vivid phrase, 'individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – a race of angles' (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*). Nevertheless, it also changes our conception of what 'cultural identity' is. In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm, either. It is *something* – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories – and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But this is no longer a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it is, like the child's relation to the mother, always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of history'.

This second view of cultural history is much less familiar, and unsettling. But it is worth spending a few moments tracing its formations. We might think of Caribbean identities as 'framed' by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture. Caribbean identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives us some grounding in, some continuity with, the past. The second reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity. The peoples dragged into slavery by the triangulate Atlantic trade came predominantly from Africa – though when that supply ended, it was temporarily refreshed by indentured labour from the Asian sub-continent. This neglected fact explains why, when you visit Guyana or Trinidad, you suddenly see, symbolically inscribed in the faces of their peoples, the paradoxical 'truth' of Christopher Columbus's mistake: you *can* find 'Asia' by sailing west, if you know where to look! The great majority of slaves were from Africa – already figured, in the European imaginary, as 'the Dark Continent'. But they were also from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods. African religion, which has been so profoundly formative in Caribbean spiritual life, is precisely *different* from Christian monotheism in having, not one, but a proliferation of gods. These gods live on, in an underground existence, in the pantheon of black Saints which people the hybridized religious universe of Latin American Catholicism. The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that 'unified'

these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to that past.

Difference, therefore, persists – in and alongside continuity. And this is so, not only for the past but in the present. To return to the Caribbean after any long absence is to experience again the shock of the ‘doubleness’ of similarity and difference. As a Jamaican returning for the First Caribbean Film Festival, I ‘recognized’ Martinique instantly, though I was seeing it for the first time. I also saw at once how different Martinique is from, say, Jamaica: and this is no mere difference of topography or climate. It is also a profound difference of culture and history. And the difference *matters*. It positions Martiniquais and Jamaicans as *both* the same *and* different. Moreover, the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference. *Vis-à-vis* the developed West, we are very much ‘the same’. We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the ‘Other’. We are at the outer edge, the ‘rim’, of the metropolitan world – always ‘South’ to someone else’s *El Norte*.

At the same time, we do not stand in the same relation of ‘otherness’ to the metropolitan centres. Each has negotiated its economic, political and cultural dependency differently. And this ‘difference’, whether we like it or not, is already inscribed in our cultural identities. In turn, it is this negotiation of identity which makes us, *vis-à-vis* other Latin American people, with a very similar history, different. Caribbeans – *les Antillennes*: ‘islanders’ to their mainland. And yet, *vis-à-vis* one another, Jamaican, Haitian, Cuban, Guadeloupean, Barbadian, etc. . . .

How, then, to describe this play of ‘difference’ within identity? The common history – transportation, slavery, colonization – has been profoundly formative. It was also, metaphorically as well as literally, a translation. The inscription of difference is also specific and critical. I use the word ‘play’ because the double meaning of the metaphor is important. It suggests, on the one hand, the instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution. On the other hand, it reminds us that the place where this ‘doubleness’ is most powerfully to be heard is ‘playing’ within the varieties of Caribbean musics. This cultural ‘play’ could not be represented, cinematically, as a simple, binary opposition – ‘past/present’, ‘them/us’. Its complexity exceeds this binary structure of representation. At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are re-sited. They become, not only what they have, at times, certainly been – mutually excluding categories: but also, what they sometimes are – differential points along a sliding scale.

One trivial example is the way Martinique both *is* and *is not* ‘French’. Superficially, Fort de France is a much richer, more ‘fashionable’ place than Kingston – which is not only visibly poorer, but itself at a point of transition between being ‘in fashion’ in an Anglo-African and Afro-American way – for those who can afford to be in any sort of fashion at all. Yet, what is distinctively ‘Martiniquais’ can only be described in terms of that special and peculiar supplement which the black and mulatto skin adds to the ‘refinement’ and

sophistication of a Parisian-derived *haute couture*: that is, a sophistication which, because it is black, is always transgressive.

To capture this sense of difference which is not pure ‘otherness’, we need to deploy the play on words of a theorist like Jacques Derrida. Derrida uses the anomalous *a* in his way of writing ‘difference’ – *différance* – as a marker which sets up a disturbance in our settled understanding or translation of the concept. It sets the word in motion to new meanings without obscuring the trace of its other meanings. His sense of *différance*, as Christopher Norris puts it, thus ‘remains suspended between the two French verbs “to differ” and “to defer” (postpone), both of which contribute to its textual force but neither of which can fully capture its meaning. Language depends on difference, as Saussure showed . . . the structure of distinctive propositions which make up its basic economy. Where Derrida breaks new ground . . . is in the extent to which “differ” shades into “defer” . . . the idea that meaning is always deferred, perhaps to the point of an endless supplementarity, by the play of signification’ (Norris, 1982: 32). This second sense of difference challenges the fixed binaries which stabilize meaning and representation and show how meaning is never finished or completed in this way, but keeps on moving to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings, which, as Norris puts it elsewhere (Norris, 1987: 15) ‘disturb the classical economy of language and representation.’ Without relations of difference, no representation could occur. But what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred, staggered, serialized.

Where, then, does identity come in to this infinite postponement of meaning? Derrida does not help us as much as he might here – and this is precisely where, in my view, he has permitted his profound theoretical insights to be reappropriated into a celebration of formal ‘playfulness’, which evacuates it of its political meaning. For if signification depends upon the endless repositioning of its differential terms, meaning, in any specific instance, depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop – the necessary and temporary ‘break’ in the infinite semiosis of language. This does not detract from the original insight. It only threatens to do so if we mistake this ‘cut’ of identity – *this positioning*, which makes meaning possible – as a natural and permanent, rather than an arbitrary and contingent ‘ending’. Whereas, I understand every such position as ‘strategic’. And arbitrary, in the sense that there is no permanent equivalence between the particular sentence we close, and its true meaning, as such. Meaning continues to unfold, so to speak, beyond the arbitrary closure which makes it, at any moment, possible. It is always either over- or undetermined – either an excess or a supplement. There is always something ‘left over’.

It is possible, with this conception of ‘difference’, to rethink the positionings and repositionings of Caribbean cultural identities in relation to at least three ‘presences’, to borrow Aimee Césaire’s and Leopold Senghor’s metaphor: *Présence Africaine*, *Présence Européenne*, and the third, most ambiguous, presence of all – the sliding term, ‘*Présence Américaine*’. I mean America, here, not in its ‘first-world’ sense – the big cousin to the North whose ‘rim’ we occupy, but in

the second, broader sense: America, the New Found Land, the 'New World', *terra incognita*.

'Presence Africaine' is the site of the repressed. Apparently silenced beyond memory by the power of the new cultures of slavery, it was in fact present everywhere: in the everyday life and customs of the slave quarters, in the languages and patois of the plantations, in names and words, often disconnected from their taxonomies, in the secret syntactical structures through which other languages were spoken, in the stories and tales told to children, in religious practices and beliefs, in the spiritual life, the arts, crafts, musics and rhythms of slave and post-emancipation society. Africa, the signified which could not be represented, remained the unspoken, unspeakable 'presence' in Caribbean culture. It is 'hiding' behind every verbal inflection, every narrative twist of Caribbean cultural life. It is the secret code with which every Western text was 're-read'. This was – is – the 'Africa' that 'is alive and well in the diaspora' (Hall, 1976).

When I was growing up as a child in Kingston, I was surrounded by the signs, music and rhythms of this Africa of the diaspora, which only existed as a result of a long and discontinuous series of transformations. But, although almost everyone around me was some shade of brown or black (Africa 'speaks!'), I never once heard a single person refer to themselves or to others as, in some way, or as having been at some time in the past, 'African'. It was only in the 1970s that this Afro-Caribbean identity became historically available to the great majority of Jamaican people, at home and abroad. In this historic moment, the great majority of Jamaicans discovered themselves to be 'black' – just as they discovered themselves to be the sons and daughters of 'slavery'.

This profound cultural discovery, however, was not, and could not be, made directly, without 'mediation'. It could only be made through the impact on popular life of the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae – the metaphors, the figures or signifiers, of a new construction of 'Jamaican-ness'. This is a 'new' Africa, grounded in an 'old'. Africa, now, as part of a spiritual journey of discovery that led, in the Caribbean, to an indigenous cultural revolution. 'Africa', as we might say, necessarily 'deferred' – as a spiritual, cultural and political metaphor.

It is the presence/absence of the 'otherness' of Africa, in this form, which made it also the privileged signifier of new conceptions of Caribbean identity. Everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background, must sooner or later come to terms with this African Presence. Black, brown, mulatto, white – all must look 'Presence Africaine' in the face, speak its name. But whether it is, in this sense, an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by 400 years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense, return, is more open to doubt. The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, 'normalizes' and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the 'primitive, unchanging past'. Africa must at

last be reckoned with, by Caribbean people. But it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered. It belongs irrevocably, for us, to what Edward Said once called an 'imaginative geography and history', which helps 'the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away' (Said, *Orientalism*). It 'has acquired an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel' (ibid.). Our belongingness to it constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls 'an imagined community'. To *this* 'Africa', which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again.

The character of this displaced 'homeward' journey – its length and complexity – comes across vividly, not yet in the Caribbean cinemas, but in other texts. Tony Sewell's text and documentary archival photographs, *Garvey's Children: The Legacy of Marcus Garvey*, tells the story of a 'return' to an African identity for Caribbean people which went, necessarily, by the long route – through London and the United States. It 'ends', not in Ethiopia, but with Garvey's statue in front of the St Ann Parish Library in Jamaica, with the music of Burning Spear and Bob Marley's Redemption Song. This is our 'long journey' home. Derek Bishton's remarkably courageous visual and written text, *Black Heart Man*, the story of the journey of a *white* photographer 'on the trail of the promised land', starts in England, and goes, through Sashamene, the place in Ethiopia to which many Jamaican people have found their way on their search for the Promised Land, and the story of slavery; but it ends in Pinnacle, Jamaica, where the first Rastafarian settlement was established, and 'beyond' – among the dispossessed of twentieth-century Kingston and the streets of Handsworth, where Bishton's voyage of discovery first began. This symbolic journey is necessary for us all – and necessarily circular.

This is the Africa we must return to but 'by another route': what Africa has *become* in the New World, what we have made of 'Africa'. 'Africa' – as we re-tell it through politics, memory and desire.

What of the second, troubling term in the identity equation – the European Presence? For many of us, this is a matter, not of too little but of too much. Where Africa was a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case of that which is endlessly speaking – and endlessly speaking *us*. The European Presence thus interrupts the innocence of the whole discourse of 'difference' in the Caribbean by introducing the question of power. 'Europe' belongs irrevocably to the question of power, to the lines of force and consent, to the pole of the *dominant* in Caribbean culture. In terms of colonialism, underdevelopment, poverty and the racism of colour, the European Presence is that which, in visual representation, has positioned us within its dominant regimes of representation: the colonial discourse, the literatures of adventure and exploration, the romance of the exotic, the ethnographic and travelling eye, the tropical languages of tourism, travel brochure and Hollywood and the violent, pornographic languages of *ganja* and urban violence.

The error is not to conceptualize this 'presence' in terms of power, but to locate that power as wholly external to us – an extrinsic force, whose influence

can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin. What Frantz Fanon reminds us, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is how its power is inside as well as outside: 'the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.' This 'look', from – so to speak – the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire. This brings us face to face, not simply with the dominating European Presence as the site or 'scene' of integration where those other presences which it had actively disaggregated were recomposed – reframed, put together in a new way; but as the site of a profound splitting and doubling: what Homi Bhabha has called 'the ambivalent identifications of the racist world'... the "otherness" of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity'.

The dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition, with and against 'Presence Européenne' is almost as complex as the so-called 'dialogue' with Africa. In terms of popular cultural life, it is nowhere to be found in its pure, pristine state. It is always already fused, syncretized, with other cultural elements. It is always-already creolized. Not 'lost beyond the Middle Passage, but ever-present, the harmonics in our musics to the ground-bass of Africa, traversing and intersecting our lives at every point. How can we stage this dialogue so that, finally, we can place it, without terror, rather than being forever placed by it? Can we ever recognize its irreversible influence, whilst resisting its imperializing eye? The enigma is impossible, so far, to resolve. It requires the most complex of cultural strategies. Think, for example, of the dialogue of every Caribbean filmmaker, one way or another, with the dominant cinemas of the 'West' – of European and American filmmaking. Who could describe this tense and tortured dialogue as a 'one way trip'?

I think of the third, 'New World' Presence, not so much in terms of power, as of ground, place, territory. It is the juncture-point where the other cultural tributaries met, the 'empty' land (the European colonizers emptied it) where strangers from every other part of the globe met. None of the people who now occupy the islands – black, brown, white, African, European, American, Spanish, French, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Jew, Dutch – originally 'belonged' there. It is the space where the creolizations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated. The New World is the third term – the primal scene where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West. It has to be understood as the place of displacements: of the original pre-Columbian inhabitants, the Arawaks, permanently displaced from their homelands; of peoples displaced in different ways from Africa, Asia and Europe; the displacements of slavery, colonization and conquest. It stands for the endless ways in which Caribbean people have been destined to 'migrate'; it is the signifier of migration itself – of travelling, voyaging, and return as fate, as destiny; of the Antillean as the prototype of the modern or postmodern New World nomad, continually

moving between centre and periphery. This preoccupation with movement and migration Caribbean cinema shares with many other 'Third Cinemas', but it is one of our defining themes, and is destined to cross the narrative of every film script or cinematic image.

Presence Americaine also has its silences, its suppressions. Peter Hulme, in his essay on 'Islands of Enchantment' (*New Formations*, no. 3, Winter, 1987) reminds us that the word 'Jamaica' is the Hispanic form of the indigenous Arawak name of the island – 'land of wood and water' – which Columbus's renaming ('Santiago') never replaced. The Arawak 'presence' remains a ghostly one, visible in the islands mainly in their museums and archeological sites, part of the barely knowable or usable 'past'. It is not represented in the emblem of the Jamaican National Heritage Trust, for example, which chose, instead, the figure of Diego Pimienta, 'an African who fought for his Spanish masters against the English invasion of the island in 1655' – a deferred, metonymic, sly and sliding representation of Jamaican identity if ever there was one! Peter Hulme recounts the story of how Prime Minister Edward Seaga tried to alter the Jamaican coat-of-arms, which consists of two Arawak figures holding a shield with five pineapples, surmounted by an alligator. 'Can the crushed and extinct Arawaks represent the dauntless character of Jamaicans? Does the low-slung, near extinct crocodile, a cold-blooded reptile, symbolize the warm, soaring spirit of Jamaicans?' Prime Minister Seaga asked, rhetorically (*Jamaica Hansard*, vol. 9, p. 363: 1983–4. Quoted in Hulme). There can be few political statements which so eloquently testify to the complexities entailed in the process of trying to represent a diverse peoples with a diverse history through a single, hegemonic 'identity'. Fortunately, Mr Seaga's invitation to the Jamaican people, who are overwhelmingly of African descent, to start their 'remembering' by first 'forgetting' something else, got the comeuppance it so richly deserved.

Thus I think of the New World Presence – America, *terra incognita* – as itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of difference: as what makes Afro-Caribbean people already the people of a diaspora. I use this term here metaphorically, not literally. I do not mean those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing form of 'ethnicity'. We have seen the fate of the people of Palestine at the hands of this backward-looking conception of diaspora – and the complicity of the West with it. The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. One can only think here of what is uniquely – 'essentially' – Caribbean: precisely the mixes of colour, pigmentation, physiognomic type; the 'blends' of tastes that is Caribbean cuisine; the aesthetics of the

'cross-overs', of 'cut-and-mix', to borrow Dick Hebdige's telling phrase, which is the heart and soul of black music.

Young black cultural practitioners and critics in Britain are increasingly coming to acknowledge and explore in their work this 'diaspora aesthetic': 'Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a "syncretic" dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and "creolizes" them, disarticulating given signs and rearticulating their symbolic meaning. The subversive force of this hybridizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where creoles, patois and black English decentre, destabilize and carnivalize the linguistic domination of "English" – the nation-language of master-discourse – through strategic inflections, reaccentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes' (Kobena Mercer, *Blackframes*).

It is because this 'New World' is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to 'lost origins', to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning. Who can ever forget, when once seen rising up out of that blue-green Caribbean, those islands of enchantment. And yet, this 'return to the beginning' is like the Imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor required, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery – in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.

I have been trying, in a series of metaphors, to put in play a different sense of our relationship to the past, and thus a different way of thinking about cultural identity, which might begin to constitute new points of recognition in the discourses of the emerging Caribbean cinema. I have been trying to speak of identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are. Communities, Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. This is the vocation of a modern Caribbean cinema: by allowing us to see and recognize the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call 'a cultural identity'.

'We must not therefore be content', Fanon warns us, 'with delving into the past of a people in order to find coherent elements which will counteract colonialism's attempts to falsify and harm. . . . A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover a people's true nature. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence' (*The Wretched of the Earth*).

40

White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory

Jane Gaines

Born in Flames, a feminist science fiction film set ten years after a Social-Democratic "revolution" in the US, provides an abrupt reminder of the place of theory in the context of social change. Toward the end of the film, with the women's takeover of New York communications channels in progress, the voice of theory is heard over the image, insisting that women also need to take over the production of language. Although the film gives credence to the voice of theory (a white female British-accented voice), it is clear that the militant Women's Emergency Brigade and the martyred Black lesbian leader are carrying the revolutionary moment. What strikes me about the juxtaposition – images of women hot-wiring U-Haul trucks and the voice of theory urging women to take control of their own images – is that the voice sounds so crisply detached and arid.¹

What I want to discuss is not so much the scene as the tenor of the female intellectual voice, which immediately recalls for me the tone of feminist film theory – firm in its insistence on attention to cinematic language and strict in its prohibition against making comparisons between "actuality" and the text. Let me be clear that this is something of a caricature of a stance which many of us who work on feminist film theory find less and less tenable.² Certainly, the intense concentration on cinema as language has helped to remedy a naiveté about form which characterized early feminist film criticism. However, as interest in the operations of the cinematic text increased, we witnessed the banishment of sociological reference points and historical detail from criticism. From this viewpoint it seems that one can only analyze the ideological through its encoding in the conventions of editing or the mechanics of the motion picture machine.³

For Marxists, this textual detachment, as I will call it, has special implications: concentration on the functioning of discourse creates the impression that developments in an ideological realm are unrelated to developments elsewhere in social life. As feminist film theory has emphasized the irresistible allure and captivating