5 Symposia organized by the Greater London Council in 1985 are documented in *Third Eye: Struggles for Black and Third World Cinema*, Race Equality Unit, London, GLC 1986; the Edinburgh conference is documented in Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds), *Third Cinema: Theories and Practices*, London, BFI (forthcoming); and the ICA conference is documented in Kobena Mercer (ed.), op.cit.

6 'Nothing but sweat inside my hand: diaspora aesthetics and Black arts in Britain', in Kobena Mercer (ed.), op.cit. See also Pierre Bourdieu, 'Delegation and political fetishism', *Thesis Eleven* 10/11, 1984–5 (Sydney), 56–70.

7 See Jim Pines, 'The cultural context of Black British cinema', in Mbye Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, Celebration of Black Cinema, Inc/MIT Press 1988 and Kobena Mercer, 'Diaspora culture and the dialogic imagination: the aesthetics of black independent film in Britain', ibid.

8 In Paul Gilroy and Jim Pines, 'Handsworth songs: audiences/aesthetics/independence, an interview with Black Audio Film Collective', *Framework* 35, 1988, 11.

9 *New Statesman*, 5 December 1986.

10 In 'The Passion of Remembrance: background and interview with Sankofa', *Framework* 32/33, 1986, 101.

11 In Nancy Adair and Casey Adair (eds), *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, New York: New Glide/Delta, 1978, 203.

12 Stuart Hall, 'New ethnicities' in this volume. Also in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Black Film/British Cinema*, op.cit. See also Stuart Hall, 'Minimal selves', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Identity, ICA Document 6*, 1988, 44–6.

13 'Songs don't know the score', *Guardian*, 12 January 1987, reprinted in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Black Film/British Cinema*, op.cit.

14 Discursive formations of British racism are discussed in Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, London: Hutchinson, 1987. Gilroy proposes the concept of syncretism to examine cultural resistance in the 'hybridized' context of black Britain, see especially chapter 5, 'Diaspora, Utopia and the critique of capitalism'.

15 Stuart Hall, 'New ethnicities', in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Black Film/British Cinema*, op.cit. Also in this volume.

16 The term 'people of color' operates in the United States as a political term analogous to 'black' in the British context. In both instances, such terms have engendered intense semantic ambiguity and ideological anxiety as the racial mythology of 'colour' is put under erasure, cancelled out but still legible, in a deconstructive logic that depends on the same system of metaphorical equivalences and differences. Semantic indeterminacy as a condition of political contestation is discussed in Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 1985.

17 See Stuart Hall, 'Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance', in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris: UNESCO, 1980; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, and *The World, the Text and the Critic*, London: Faber, 1984; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, London: Methuen 1987; Cornel West, 'The dilemma of a Black intellectual', *Cultural Critique* 1(1), 1986; 'Race and social theory', in M. Davis, M. Marrable, F. Pfiel and M. Sprinker (eds), *The Year Left 2*, London: Verso, 1987 and 'Marxist theory and the specificity of Afro-American oppression', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: Macmillan, 1988.

18 Interview with Sylvia Paskin, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 54(647), December 1987.

19 Steve Neale, 'The same old story: stereotypes and difference', *Screen Education*, Autumn–Winter 1979–80, nos 32 and 33, 33–7 and Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other question: the stereotype and colonial discourse', *Screen*, November–December 1983, 24(6), 18–36.

20 In both Weberian and marxist variants, see Charles Husband, *White Media and Black Britain*, London: Arrow, 1975 and Stuart Hall *et al., Policing the Crisis*, London: Macmillan, 1978. Cultural struggles over media racism are documented in Phil Cohen and Carl Gardner (eds), *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*, London: Comedia/Campaign Against Racism in the Media, 1982. CARM's BBC 'Open Door' programme is discussed in Stuart Hall, 'The whites of their eyes: racist ideologies and the media', in Bridges and Brunt (eds), *Silver Linings*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1981.

21 'Racism, colonialism and the cinema', *Screen*, March–April 1983, 24(2), and 'Other cinemas, Other criticisms', *Screen*, May–August 1985, 26(3–4).

22 Black British perspectives have rarely featured in *Screen*, but see Hazel Carby, 'Multiculture', *Screen Education*, Spring 1980, 34, 62–70; Paul Gilroy, 'C4 – Bridgehead or Bantustan?', *Screen*, July–October 1983, 24(4–5), 130–6; Robert Crusz, 'Black cinemas, film theory and dependent knowledge', *Screen*, May–August 1985, 26(3–4), 152–6.

23 The description of a 'theoretical super ego' in film studies is made by Paul Willemen in 'An avant-garde for the 80s', *Framework* 24, 1982 and in 'The Third Cinema question: notes and reflections', *Framework* 34, 1987. The characterization of orthodoxies in terms of the demands of a 'phallic mother' is made by Lesley Stern in her tribute, 'Remembering Claire Johnston', in *Film News*, 19(4), May 1988 (Sydney), reprinted in *Framework* 35, 1988. An interesting case of another translation this time in the postcolonial periphery, is provided by Felicity Collins, 'The Australian Journal of Screen Theory', in *Framework* 24, 1982.

24 Methods employed by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are the subject of a critique by Benita Parry, 'Problems in current theories of colonial discourse', *Oxford Literary Review* 9, 1987.

25 An issue raised in Jim Pines' reading of sociological stereotypes in Horace Ove's *Pressure* (1975), discussed in 'Blacks in films: the British angle', *Multiracial Education* 9(2), 1981. Some of the paradoxical consequences of documentary realism in black independent film are also discussed in Kobena Mercer, 'Recoding narratives of race and nation', in *Black Film/British Cinema*, op.cit.

26 See Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately seeking difference', *Screen*, Winter 1987, 28(1), 48–61; reprinted in a slightly different version in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (eds), *The Female Gaze*, London: Women's Press, 1988.

27 Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth: Pelican Freud Library 7, 1977, 357.

28 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1975.

29 This again is by no means a 'new' topic. The starting-point for James Baldwin's autobiographical reflections on cinema is his adolescent identification with Bette Davis' star image; see *The Devil Finds Work*, London: Michael Joseph, 1976, 4–7.

30 *The Cosby Show* is the subject of two conflicting readings – as a 'breakthrough' and as a 'sell out': see Mel Cummings, 'Black family interactions on television', presented at the International Television Studies Conference, London,

1986 and Pat Skinner, 'Moving way up: television's "new look" at Blacks', presented at the International Television Studies Conference, London, 1988. Both ITSC conferences sponsored by the British Film Institute and the Institute of Education, University of London.

31 The concept of 'Third Cinema' was originally proposed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino; see their 'Towards a Third Cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, London and Berkeley: University of California, 1976. It has subsequently been expanded, with particular reference to African cinema, by Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982.

32 Jean Genet's film is the subject of intense debate in the Cultural Identities seminar on 'Sexual identities: questions of difference', in *Undercut* 17, 1988. Maxine, the black woman in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, is identified as a signifier of 'dark continent' mythology in Judith Williamson's critique of the film, 'Two or three things we know about ourselves', in *Consuming Passions*, London: Calder & Boyars, 1986, 134. Frankie Dymon Jr was involved in Godard's *One Plus One* and subsequently directed his own film, *Death May Be Your Santa Claus* (1969), described as a 'pop fantasy' by Jim Pines, in 'The cultural context of Black British cinema', op.cit.

33 Identified as indicative of class struggle, in V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, New York: Seminar Press, 1983. From another point of view, similar concepts are explored in Homi K. Bhabha's reinterpretation of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin, 1970) in his essay, 'The commitment to theory', in *New Formations* 5, 1988, 20–2.

34 Richard Dyer, 'Paul Robeson: crossing over', in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, London: BFI/Macmillan, 1987, 79.

35 See Rosalind Coward, 'Class, "culture" and the social formation', *Screen*, Spring 1977, 18(1) 75–105 and the response, from Iain Chambers *et al.*, 'Marxism and culture', *Screen*, Winter 1977–8, 18(4), 109–19. On authorship, enunciation and textual analysis, see Paul Willemen, 'Notes on subjectivity: on reading Edward Branigan's "Subjectivity under siege"', *Screen*, Spring 1978, 19(1), 41–69. And on critiques of '*Screen* theory' from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, see David Morley, 'Texts, readers, subjects' and Stuart Hall, 'Recent developments in theories of language and ideology: a critical note', both in Stuart Hall *et al.* (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson, 1980.

Chapter 23

What is this 'black' in black popular culture?

Stuart Hall

I begin with a question: What sort of moment is this in which to pose the question of black popular culture? These moments are always conjunctural. They have their historical specificity; and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment. And the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question, and therefore the strategies of cultural politics with which we attempt to intervene in popular culture, and the form and style of cultural theory and criticizing that has to go along with such an intermatch. In his important essay, 'The new cultural politics of difference',[1] Cornel West offers a genealogy of what this moment is, a genealogy of the present that I find brilliantly concise and insightful. His genealogy follows, to some extent, positions I tried to outline in an article that has become somewhat notorious,[2] but it also usefully maps the moment into an American context and in relation to the cognitive and intellectual philosophical traditions with which it engages.

According to West, the moment, this moment, has three general co-ordinates. The first is the displacement of European models of high culture, of Europe as the universal subject of culture, and of culture itself in its old Arnoldian reading as the last refuge . . . I nearly said of scoundrels, but I won't say who it is of. At least we know who it was against – culture against the barbarians, against the people rattling the gates as the deathless prose of anarchy flowed away from Arnold's pen. The second co-ordinate is the emergence of the United States as a world power and, consequently, as the centre of global cultural production and circulation. This emergence is both a displacement and a hegemonic shift in the *definition* of culture – a movement from high culture to American mainstream popular culture and its mass-cultural, image-mediated, technological forms. The third co-ordinate is the decolonization of the Third World,

culturally marked by the emergence of the decolonized sensibilities. And I read the decolonization of the Third World in Frantz Fanon's sense: I include in it the impact of civil rights and black struggles on the decolonization of the minds of the peoples of the black diaspora.

Let me add some qualifications to that general picture, qualifications that, in my view, make this present moment a very distinctive one in which to ask the question about black popular culture. First, I remind you of the ambiguities of that shift from Europe to America, since it includes America's ambivalent relationship to European high culture and the ambiguity of America's relationship to its own internal ethnic hierarchies. Western Europe did not have, until recently, any ethnicity at all. Or didn't recognize it had any. America has always had a series of ethnicities, and consequently, the construction of ethnic hierarchics has always defined its cultural politics. And, of course, silenced and unacknowledged, the fact of American popular culture itself, which has always contained within it, whether silenced or not, black American popular vernacular traditions. It may be hard to remember that, when viewed from outside of the United States, American mainstream popular culture has always involved certain traditions that could only be attributed to black cultural vernacular traditions.

The second qualification concerns the nature of the period of cultural globalization in progress now. I hate the term 'the global postmodern', so empty and sliding a signifier that it can be taken to mean virtually anything you like. And, certainly, blacks are as ambiguously placed in relation to postmodernism as they were in relation to high modernism: even when denuded of its wide-European, disenchanted marxist, French intellectual provenance and scaled down to a more modest descriptive status, postmodernism remains extremely unevenly developed as a phenomenon in which the old centre peripheries of high modernity consistently reappear. The only places where one can genuinely experience the postmodern ethnic cuisine are Manhattan and London, not Calcutta. And yet it is impossible to refuse 'the global postmodern' entirely, insofar as it registers certain stylistic shifts in what I want to call the cultural dominant. Even if postmodernism is not a new cultural epoch, but only modernism in the streets, that, in itself, represents an important shifting of the terrain of culture toward the popular – toward popular practices, toward everyday practices, toward local narratives, toward the decentring of old hierarchies and the grand narratives. This decentring or displacement opens up new spaces of contestation and affects a momentous shift in the high culture of popular culture relations, thus presenting us with a strategic and important opportunity for intervention in the popular cultural field.

Third, we must bear in mind postmodernism's deep and ambivalent fascination with difference – sexual difference, cultural difference, racial difference, and above all, ethnic difference. Quite in opposition to the

blindness and hostility that European high culture evidenced on the whole toward ethnic difference – its inability even to speak ethnicity when it was so manifestly registering its effects – there's nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic, as we say in England, 'a bit of the other' (which in the United Kingdom has a sexual as well as an ethnic connotation). Michele Wallace was quite right, in her seminal essay 'Modernism, postmodernism and the problem of the visual in Afro-American culture',[3] to ask whether this reappearance of a proliferation of difference, of a certain kind of ascent of the global postmodern, isn't a repeat of that 'now you see it, now you don't' game that modernism once played with primitivism, to ask whether it is not once again achieved at the expense of the vast silencing about the West's fascination with the bodies of black men and women of other ethnicities. And we must ask about that continuing silence within postmodernism's shifting terrain, about whether the forms of licensing of the gaze that this proliferation of difference invites and allows, at the same time as it disavows, is not really, along with Benetton and the mixed male models of *The Face*, a kind of difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind.

Hal Foster writes – Wallace quotes him in her essay – 'the primitive is a modern problem, a crisis in cultural identity'[4] – hence, the modernist construction of primitivism, the fetishistic recognition and disavowal of the primitive difference. But this resolution is only a repression, delayed into our political unconscious, the primitive returns uncannily at the moment of its apparent political eclipse. This rupture of primitivism, managed by modernism, becomes another postmodern event. That managing is certainly evident in the difference that may not make a difference, which marks the ambiguous appearance of ethnicity at the heart of global postmodernism. But it cannot be only that. For we cannot forget how cultural life, above all in the West, but elsewhere as well, has been transformed in our lifetimes by the voicing of the margins.

Within culture, marginality, though it remains peripheral to the broader mainstream, has never been such a productive space as it is now. And that is not simply the opening within the dominant of spaces that those outside it can occupy. It is also the result of the cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage. This is true not only in regard to race, but also for other marginalized ethnicities, as well as around feminism and around sexual politics in the gay and lesbian movement, as a result of a new kind of cultural politics. Of course, I don't want to suggest that we can counterpose some easy sense of victories won to the eternal story of our own marginalization – I'm tired of those two continuous grand counter-narratives. To remain within them is to become trapped in that endless either/or, either total victory or total incorporation,

which almost never happens in cultural politics, but with which cultural critics always put themselves to bed.

What we are talking about is the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else. That high/popular distinction is precisely what the global postmodern is displacing. Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that's not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it. There is a kind of 'nothing every changes, the system always wins' attitude, which I read as the cynical protective shell that, I'm sorry to say, American cultural critics frequently wear, a shell that sometimes prevents them from developing cultural strategies that can make a difference. It is as if, in order to protect themselves against the occasional defeat, they have to pretend they can see right through everything – and it's just the same as it always was.

Now cultural strategies that can make a difference, that's what I'm interested in – those that can make a difference and can shift the dispositions of power. I acknowledge that the spaces 'won' for difference are few and far between, that they are very carefully policed and regulated. I believe they are limited. I know, to my cost, that they are grossly underfunded, that there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into spectacularization. I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility. But it does not help simply to name-call it 'the same'. That name-calling merely reflects the particular model of cultural politics to which we remain attached, precisely, the zero-sum game – our model replacing their model, our identities in place of their identities – what Antonio Gramsci called culture as a once and for all 'war of manoeuvre', when, in fact, the only game in town worth playing is the game of cultural 'wars of position'.

Lest you think, to paraphrase Gramsci, my optimism of the will has now completely outstripped my pessimism of the intellect, let me add a fourth element that comments on the moment. For, if the global postmodern represents an ambiguous opening to difference and to the margins and makes a certain kind of decentring of the western narrative a likely possibility, it is matched, from the very heartland of cultural politics, by the backlash: the aggressive resistance to difference; the attempt to restore the canon of western civilization; the assault, direct and indirect, on multiculturalism; the return to grand narratives of history, language and literature (the three great supporting pillars of national identity and national culture); the defence of ethnic absolutism, of a cultural racism that has marked the Thatcher and the Reagan eras; and the new xenophobias that are about to overwhelm fortress Europe. The last thing to do is read me as

saying the cultural dialectic is finished. Part of the problem is that we have forgotten what sort of space the space of popular culture is. And black popular culture is not exempt from that dialectic, which is historical, not a matter of bad faith. It is therefore necessary to deconstruct the popular once and for all. There is no going back to an innocent view of what it consists of.

Popular culture carries that affirmative ring because of the prominence of the word 'popular'. And, in one sense, popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyday experiences of ordinary folks. Hence, it links with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'the vulgar' – the popular, the informal, the underside, the grotesque. That is why it has always been counterposed to elite or high culture, and is thus a site of alternative traditions. And that is why the dominant tradition has always been deeply suspicious of it, quite rightly. They suspect that they are about to be overtaken by what Bakhtin calls 'the carnivalesque'. This fundamental mapping of culture between the high and the low has been charted into four symbolic domains by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their important book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* They talk about the mapping of high and low in psychic forms, in the human body, in space, and in the social order.[5] And they discuss the high/low distinction as a fundamental basis to the mechanism of ordering and of sense-making in European and other cultures despite the fact that the contents of what is high and what is low change from one historical moment to another.

The important point is the ordering of different aesthetic morals, social aesthetics, the orderings of culture that open up culture to the play of power, not an inventory of what is high versus what is low at any particular moment. That is why Gramsci, who has a side of common sense on which, above all, cultural hegemony is made, lost, and struggled over, gave the question of what he called 'the national-popular' such strategic importance. The role of the 'popular' in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly made over as low and outside.

However, as popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, *par excellence*, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology – the circuits of power and capital. It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the