INTRODUCTION: DE MARGIN AND DE CENTRE

Film culture in the '80s has been marked by volatile reconfigurations in the relations of 'race' and representation. Questions of cultural difference, identity and otherness — in a word, ethnicity — have been thrown into the foreground of contestation and debate by numerous shifts and developments. Within the British context, these trends have underpinned controversies around recent independent films like *Handsworth Songs*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Passion of Remembrance* — films which have elicited critical acclaim and angry polemic in roughly equal measure. The fragmented state of the nation depicted from a black British point of view in the films themselves contradicts (literally, speaks against) the remythification of the colonial past in mainstream movies such as *Gandhi* or *A Passage to India*; yet, the wave of popular films set in imperial India or Africa also acknowledge, in their own way, Britain's post-colonial condition in so far as they speak to contemporary concerns. The competing versions of narrative, memory and history in this conjuncture might be read symptomatically as a state of affairs that speaks of — articulates — conflicting identities within the 'imagined community' of the nation.

In the international context, certain moments and trends suggest further shifts, adjustments, in the articulation of ethnicity as ideology. The ratings success-story of *The Cosby Show* — 'number one' in South Africa as well as the United States — has fulfilled the innocent demand for 'positive images' with a (neo-conservative) vengeance. And the very idea of a Hollywood director like Steven Spielberg adapting the Alice Walker novel *The Color Purple* (in the context of the unprecedented publication of black women writers) still seems extraordinary, however commercially astute. In addition, the widening circulation of Third World films among Western audiences, or the televisual 'presence' of Third World spaces like Ethiopia via events such as Live Aid in 1985, implies something of a shift within the boundaries that differentiated the First and Third Worlds.

One issue at stake, we suggest, is the potential break-up or deconstruction of structures that determine what is regarded as culturally central and what is regarded as culturally marginal. Ethnicity has emerged as a key issue as various 'marginal' practices (black British film, for instance) are becoming de-marginalised at a time when 'centred' discourses of cultural authority and legitimisation (such as notions of a trans-historical artistic 'canon') are becoming increasingly de-centred and destabilised, called into question from within. This scenario, described by Craig Owens as a crisis, 'specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions'¹, has of course already been widely discussed in terms of the characteristic aesthetic and political problems of postmodernism. However, it is ironic that while some of the loudest voices offering commentary have announced nothing less than the 'end of representation' or the 'end of history', the political possibility of the *end of ethnocentrism* has not been seized upon as a suitably exciting topic for descric-
tion or inquiry\(^2\). We would argue, on the contrary, that critical theories are just beginning to recognise and reckon with the kinds of complexity inherent in the culturally constructed nature of ethnic identities, and the implications this has for the analysis of representational practices.

We chose to call this the 'last special issue' as a rejoinder to critical discourses in which the subject of race and ethnicity is still placed on the margins conceptually, despite the acknowledgement of such issues indicated by the proliferation of 'special issues' on race in film, media and literary journals. The problem, paradoxically, is that as an editorial strategy and as a mode of address, the logic of the 'special issue' tends to reinforce, rather than ameliorate, the perceived otherness and marginality of the subject itself. There is nothing intrinsically different or 'special' about ethnicity in film culture, merely that it makes fresh demands on existing theories, methods and problematics. Rather than attempt to compensate the 'structured absences' of previous paradigms, it would be useful to identify the relations of power/knowledge that determine which cultural issues are intellectually prioritised in the first place. The initial stage in any deconstructive project must be to examine and undermine the force of the binary relation that produces the marginal as a consequence of the authority invested in the centre.

At a concrete level the politics of marginalisation is an underlying issue in the overview of black film-making in Europe sketched by Maureen Blackwood and June Givanni. The negotiation of access to resources in training, production and distribution emerges as a common factor facing practitioners in a migrant or 'minority' situation. While highlighting the different conditions stemming from the colonial past, the comparative dimension also draws attention to the specificity of British conditions in the present, where black film-making has flourished in the state-subsidised 'independent' sector. Data compiled by June Givanni elsewhere\(^4\) indicates some of the characteristics that constitute black British film as a 'minor' cinema: the prevalence of material of short duration, shot on video, and in the documentary genre, indicates a pattern of underfunding, or rather, taking the variety of work into consideration, a considerable cultural achievement that has been won against the odds of meagre resourcing. Moreover, shifts in the institutional framework of public funding in the UK were brought about in the '80s as a result of a wider social and political struggle to secure black rights to representation. It was said at the time of the 1981 'riots' that this was the only way in which those excluded from positions of power and influence could make themselves heard: in any case, the events were read and widely understood as expressing protest at the structural marginalisation of the black presence in British public institutions.

The consequent demand for black representation thus informed shifts in multicultural and 'equal opportunity' policy among institutions such as Channel Four, the British Film Institute and local authorities such as the Greater London Council. More generally, this took place in the context of a re-articulation of the category 'black' as a political term of identification among diverse minority communities of Asian, African and Caribbean origin, rather than as a biological or 'racial' category. Together, these aspects of the cultural politics of 'black representation' informed the intense debates on aesthetic and cinematic strategies within the black British independent sector. Far from homogenising these differences, the concept has been the site of contestation, highlighted in numerous events and conferences, such as 'Third Film Cinema' at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 1986 and more recently, the conference on 'Black Film/British Cinema' at the

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Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. It has become apparent that what is at stake in the debates on 'black representation' is not primarily a dispute over realist or modernist principles, but a broader problematic in cultural politics shaped, as Paul Gilroy suggests, by the tension between representation as a practice of depiction and representation as a practice of delegation. Representation democracy, like the classic realist text, is premised on an implicitly mimetic theory of representation as correspondence with the 'real': notionally, the political character of the state is assumed to 'correspond' to the aspiration of the masses in society. However, not unlike the civil disruptions, aspects of the new wave in black British film-making have interrupted these relations of representation: in cinematic terms the challenge to documentary realism that features so prominently in more recent work, such as Territories, is predicated on a relational conception of representation as a practice of selection, combination and articulation. At a textual level, such shifts have contested the hegemony of documentary realism underlying the formal codification of what Jim Pines calls the master discourse of the 'race-relations narrative'. This also entails awareness of extra-textual factors, such as funding, as important determinants on black film-making and its modes of enunciation, such as 'the moral imperative which usually characterises black films, which empowers them to speak with a sense of urgency', as John Akomfrah of Black Audio Film Collective has put it.

What is at issue in this problematic is the question of power, as Judith Williamson argues in her review of The Passion of Remembrance, 'The more power any group has to create and wield representations, the less it is required to be representative'. Where access and opportunities are rationed, so that black films tend to get made only one-at-a-time, each film text is burdened with an inordinate pressure to be 'representative' and to act, like a delegate does, as a statement that 'speaks' for the black communities as a whole. Martina Attille, producer of the film, suggests that the 'sense of urgency to say it all' stems less from the artistic choices made by black filmmakers and more from the material constraints in which 'sometimes we only get the one chance to make ourselves heard'. Contemporary shifts have brought these problems into view, for as Williamson adds, in relation to the invisible demand to be 'representative' implicit in the rationing and rationalisation of public funding, 'what is courageous in Sankofa's project is that they have chosen to speak from, but not for, black experience(s) in Britain'.

Marginality circumscribes the enunciative modalities of black film as cinematic discourse and imposes a double bind on black subjects who speak in the public sphere: if only one voice is given the 'right to speak', that voice will be heard, by the majority culture, as speaking for the many who are excluded or marginalised from access to the means of representation. This of course underlines the problem of tokenism: the very idea that a single film could 'speak for' an entire community of interests reinforces the perceived secondariness of that community. The double bind of expedient inclusion as a term for the legitimation of more general forms of exclusionary practice is also the source of a range of representational problems encountered not just by black subjects, but by other groups marginalised into minority status. In the gay documentary Word is Out (Mariposa Film Group, 1978) the nature of this problematic is pointed out in a performative mode by a black woman who carefully describes the predicament she is placed in as a result of the editing strategy of the text:

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9 New Statesman, December 5, 1986.

What I was trying to say when I asked you if I would be the only black lesbian in the film is: do you know how all black lesbians are. I happen to be among many, and I wouldn't want to be seen as this is how all black lesbians are. 11

Within such a regime of representation, the restricted economy of ethnic enunciation is a political problem for at least two important reasons. First, individual subjectivity is denied because the black subject is positioned as a mouthpiece, a ventriloquist for an entire social category which is seen to be 'typified' by its representative. Acknowledgement of the diversity of black experiences and subject-positions is thereby foreclosed. Thus, secondly, where minority subjects are framed and contained by the monologic terms of 'majority discourse', the fixity of boundary relations between centre and margin, universal and particular, returns the speaking subject to the ideologically appointed place of the stereotype—that 'all black people are the same'.

Stuart Hall's account of the shifts taking place in contemporary black British cultural production offers a means of making sense of the 'politics of representation' at issue here. His argument that current shifts demand the recognition of the 'end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' enables us to analyse and unpack the burden of racial representation. The recognition that 'black' is a politically and culturally constructed category, and that our metaphorical fictions of 'white' and 'black' are not fixed by Nature but by historical formations of hegemony, brings into play 'the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects'. This has major consequences for the critical evaluation of different aesthetic and discursive strategies that articulate race at the level of language and representation.

Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily right-on by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. 12

The deconstruction of binary relations thus entails the relativisation and rearticulation of 'ethnicity'. This is an importantly enabling argument as it brings a range of critical issues into an explanatory structure, however tentative.

At one level, it contextualises Salmon Rushdie's point, expressed in his polemic against Handsworth Songs 13, that 'celebration makes us lazy'. Because black films have been so few and far between, up till now, there has been a tendency to 'celebrate' the fact that they ever got made at all; but this has inhibited the formulation of criticism and self-criticism and perpetuated the moral masochism of 'correctness' so pervasive in oppositional 'left' cultural politics (especially in Britain). Judith Williamson takes up this point and argues that the moralism of being ideologically 'right-on' has been conflated with aesthetic judgement and thus the formal properties of the recent 'experimental' films have been subsumed into their 'blackness' (that is, the racial identity of the authors) giving the films an 'aura of untouchability' that further pre-empts critical analysis. The problem which arises, is that such responses threaten to frame the films as merely replacing the avant-garde (as the 'latest thing') rather than as displacing the orthodoxies that have led the Euro-American vanguard (especially its formalist variant) into its current stasis. At another level, Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap argues that the debates on black British film have in turn made Asian experiences and interventions 'secondary', thus risking the replication of essentialist versions of race precisely when the rearticulation of subaltern ethnicities as 'black' seeks to undermine the 'ethnic absolutism' (anchoring the culturalist terms of the 'new racism' that fixes hybridised ex-


periences in terms of alien cultures'\(^{14}\). Coco Fusco’s assessment of two major conferences in the US examines the way in which two kinds of essentialist tendency, manifest in the contradictory reception of black British film, mutually forestall the politics of criticism. The impetus to ‘celebrate’ black cinema, on the one hand, invokes a unitary notion of blackness that precludes elucidation of ‘internal’ differences and diversity. The desire to ‘correct’ the omissions of the past within the Western avant-garde, on the other hand, has led to a one-sided fixation with ethnicity as something that ‘belongs’ to the Other alone, thus white ethnicity is not under question and retains its ‘centred’ position; more to the point, the white subject remains the central reference point in the power plays of multicultural policy. The burden of representation thus falls on the Other, because as Fusco argues, ‘to ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it’.

While such discursive events acknowledge contemporary shifts, their logic evades the implications of Hall’s insight that the point of contestation is no longer between multiculturalism and anti-racism, but inside the concept of ethnicity itself. Within dominant discourses, ‘ethnicity’ is structured into a negative equivalence with essentialist versions of ‘race’ and ‘nation’ which particularise its referent, as the pejorative connotation of ‘ethnic minority’ implies (who, after all, constitutes the ‘ethnic majority’?). On the other hand, just as it was necessary to re-appropriate the category ‘black’, Hall argues that ‘ethnicity’ is a strategically necessary concept because it

\[\text{acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes that have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time.}\]

In this sense, ‘we are all ethnically located’, but the cultural specificity of white ethnicity has been rendered ‘invisible’ by the epistemic violence that has, historically, disavowed difference in Western discourses. The rearticulation of ethnicity as an epistemological category thus involves,

\[\text{The displacement of the centred discourses of the West (and) entails putting into question its universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere.}\]

Richard Dyer’s article, ‘White’, inaugurates a paradigmatic shift by precisely registering the re-orientation of ‘ethnicity’ that Hall’s argument calls for. Dyer shows how elusive white ethnicity is as a representational construct (and the difficulties this presents for constituting it as a theoretical object of analysis) and notes that, ‘Black is, in the realm of categories, always marked as a colour . . . is always particularising; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything’. In other words, whiteness has secured universal consent to its hegemony as the ‘norm’ by masking its coercive force with the invisibility that marks off the Other (the pathologised, the disempowered, the dehumanised) as all too visible – ‘coloured’.\(^{16}\) Significantly, in relation to the films that Dyer discusses, whiteness only tends to become visible when its hegemony is under contestation.

The complex range of problems now coming into view in film studies around the site of ethnicity, partly as a result of developments elsewhere in literary and social theory\(^{17}\), enables a more ade-

\(^{14}\) Discursive formations of British racism are discussed in Paul Gilroy, \textit{There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack}, London, Hutchinson, 1987. Gilroy proposes the concept of syncretism to examine cultural resistance in the ‘hybridised’ context of black Britain, see especially chapter 5, ‘Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism’.


\(^{16}\) The term ‘people of colour’ operates in the US 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, \textit{Hegemony and Socialis Strategy}, London, Verso, 1985.

quate understanding of contemporary forms of contestation. The ‘differences’ between various black independent film practices have, to some extent, been overplayed, as the key underlying objective across each of the strategies, is to displace the binary relation of the burden of representation, most clearly pinpointed by Horace Ove:

*Here in England there is a danger, if you are black, that all you are allowed to make is films about black people and their problems. White film-makers on the other hand, have a right to make films about whatever they like.*  

Theoretically, the displacement of binarisms has been most important in the analysis of stereotyping – the marginalisation of ethnicity has been held in place by the logical impasse of the ‘positive/negative’ image polarity. *Screen* has contributed to the productive displacement of this stasis in a number of ways: from Steve Neale’s analysis of the impossibility of the ‘perfect image’ sought by idealist and realist arguments, to Homi Bhabha’s influential reading of colonial discourse, which emphasises the psychic ambivalence, the fear and fascination, that informs the ‘Manichean delirium’ of classical regimes of racial representation. However, the range of textual readings here suggests that we need to go much further towards a reflexive examination of the mutual inscription of self and other in the analysis of ethnic boundary-ness. This involves questioning the way that, during its ‘centred’ role in the discursive formation of film theory during the 1970s, *Screen* participated in a phase of British left culture that inadvertently marginalised race and ethnicity as a consequence of the centrifugal tendency of its ‘high theory’.

During this period, one was more likely to encounter the analysis of racial stereotyping in sociology than cultural theory, where class and gender took precedence in debates on ideology and subjectivity. Furthermore, without imputing maleficent intentions (because such relations are beyond the control of individual intentionality), it can be said that even within *Screen’s* important acknowledgement of ethnic difference in previous ‘special issues’, the explanatory concept of ‘otherness’ distances and particularises ethnicity as something that happens far away, either in the US or in the ‘Third World’. Space prohibits an adequate exploration of the intellectual milieu that *Screen* helped to form, but recent comments on the institutionalisation of film studies have argued that ‘*Screen* theory’, so-called, came to function as a kind of corporate ‘name of the father’, a ‘theoretical super-ego’ or even a ‘phallic mother’ – a centred point of reference that, like a doctrine or orthodoxy, featured a number of ‘disciplinary’ characteristics. Jane Gaines recalls that, in the translation of ‘*Screen* theory’ into the North American academic environment in the ‘70s, leftist enthusiasm for theoretical ‘correctness’ was heard to speak in an unmistakably English accent. This background is important because what emerges in the current situation is not a ‘new’

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22 Black British perspectives have rarely featured in *Screen*, but see Hazel Carby, ‘Multiculture’, *Screen Education* Spring 1980, no 34, pp 62-70; Paul Gilroy, ‘CA – Bridgehead or Bantustan?’, *Screen* July-October 1983, vol 24 no 4-5, pp 130-136; Robert Cruse, ‘Black Cinemas, Film Theory and Dependent Knowledge’, *Screen* May-August 1985, vol 26 nos 3-4, pp 152-156.


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problematic, but a critical return to issues unwittingly 'repressed' in some of the 'old' problematics and debates. It would be useful, therefore, to tentatively draw out some of the directions in which the field is being remapped and in which the lacunae of previous paradigms are excavated.

First, the analysis of ethnic binarisms at the level of narrative codes returns to the question of how dominant ideologies naturalise their domination, underlying previous debates on the classic realist text. Clyde Taylor's intertextual examination of racialised repetition across two 'epic' Hollywood films suggests that the ethnic iconography that drives the reproduction of racist ideology is not simply indicative of capitalist commodification or a bourgeois world view. *Star Wars*, argues Taylor, repeats the 'blood and purity' mythology of *The Birth of a Nation*, not as a defiant assertion of WASP 'superiority' but as an embattled recoding of the master text in response to the encroaching presence of the Third World. The racial discourse sub-textualised by binary oppositions acknowledges the crises of (US) hegemony. The 'liberal' inflections in the films discussed by Richard Dyer also acknowledge the destabilisation of prevailing race relations, albeit within a different set of generic and narrative conventions. Common to both readings is a concern to 'typify' textual structures that position racial and ethnic signifiers in the fixed relation of a binary opposition, whether it be one of antagonism, accommodation or subordination.

There is, in addition, a historical emphasis that relativises the kinds of claims once extrapolated from the formal structures of the 'CRT', as it was known. Aspects of Bhabha's theorisation of the stereotype in colonial discourse replicate this trans-historical or de-historicised emphasis. The move towards a more context-oriented view, on the other hand, indicates that although dominant discourses are characterised by closure, they are not themselves closed but constantly negotiated and restructured by the conjuncture of discourses in which they are produced. The way in which ethnic 'types' are made fresh in contemporary movies like *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Angel Heart* – or more generally in current advertising – demands such a conjunctural approach. The theory of the stereotype cannot be abandoned as it also needs to be able to explain how and why certain ethnic stereotypes are at times recirculated, in the British context, in the work of black film and television authors. Secondly, there is a note of caution about reproducing binarisms at the level of theory. Cameron Bailey's reading of the accretion of 'ethnic' signifiers around the construction of (white) femininity as a source of pleasure and danger in *Something Wild* demonstrates that, rather than the familiar 'race, class, gender' mantra, analysis needs to take account of the intersections of differences, in particular of the representation of sexuality as a recurring site upon which categories of race and gender intersect. Feminist theories of the fetishistic logic inherent in the sexualisation of gender-difference have provided an invaluable inventory for the reading of the eroticised othering of the black (male and female) subject. Yet, as Jane Gaines argues, the gender binarism implicit in the heterosexist presumption so often unwittingly reproduced in feminist film theory (or FFT; the acronym already indicates an orthodoxy) remains 'colour blind' to the racial hierarchies that structure master over the 'look'. The scenario voyeurism, sadism and the objectification played out across Diana Ross' star image in *Mahogany* enacts a patriarchal discourse of masculine 'desire', but also demands a historical understanding of the pre-textual and the contextual discourses of race that placed the black woman in the 'paradox of non-being' – a reference to the period in African-American history when the black female did not signify 'woman' on account of the racial ideology that made the black subject less than human.

The historical violation of black bodies in social formations structured by slavery gives rise to a discourse (encoded in both the rationalisation of and resistance to such pre-modern forms of power as lynching) which has indeed the countervailing force to rival the problematic of castration rhetorically placed at the centre of psychoanalytic theory

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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*, vol 9, 1987.

by the Oedipal grand narrative. Just as lesbian critiques of FFT have questioned the explanatory capacity of Freudian and Lacanian theory to account for the inscription of female pleasure and desire, demonstrating the contradictory subject positions occupied by different spectators - the reorientation of the spectatorship problematic in the articles by Gaines and Manthia Diawara identifies the ethnocentrism of psychoanalytic discourse as a barrier to further inquiry. Both questions the universalist claims anchored in the Oedipus story and imply that uncritical adherence to psychoanalytic theory (however enabling as a method) risks the disavowal of its Eurocentric 'authority'; Freud closes his essay on fetishism by commenting that the acknowledgement and disavowal of difference 'might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated' - surely this culture-bound aesthetic judgement is the starting point for a more circumspect appropriation of psychoanalytic theory.

Diawara identifies the mythic 'castration' and 'visual punishment' of the black male as a term of the 'narrative pleasures' offered by Hollywood spectacle (and also as a narratological term of closure, analogous to the 'punishment' of feminine transgression in film noir). By raising the issue of spectatorial resistance, Diawara opens up an interesting question about the place of the black spectator in the ideological machinery of interpellation. How is the black subject sutured into a place that includes it only as a term of negation? What does the black spectator identify with when his/her mirror image is structurally absent or present only as Other? In the past, it was assumed that all social subjects acceded to the narcissistic pleasure of the 'mirror phase' in their misrecognition of themselves as the subject of enunciation, returned thus as normalised and passified 'subjects' of ideological subjection (this was the basis of Barthes' distinction between 'pleasure' and 'bliss'). But what if certain social categories of spectator do not have access, as it were, to the initial moment of recognition? The question of how black subjects psychically manage to make identifications with white images is thus signposted as an important area for further inquiry. Perhaps one reason why, for example, The Cosby Show is so popular among black audiences is that it affords the pleasure of a basic or primary narcissism even though it interpellates the minority subject, in particular, into ideological normalisation. A contemporary black star, like Eddie Murphy - popular with both white and black audiences - offers another source of 'bad pleasure', partly on account of the pastiche of the stereotype that he performs in his star-image as the street-credible, but ideologically unthreatening, macho loudmouth.

This is also where class comes back into the calculation of difference. An appreciation of differentiated regimes of racial representation necessitates acknowledgement of different audiences or, taken together, recognition of the different forms of ideological articulation characteristic of First and Second Cinemas, as described by the concept of Third Cinema. The inscription of ethnic indeterminacy does not take place 'inside' the text, as if it were hermetically sealed, but in-between the relations of author, text and reader specific to the construction of different discursive formations. Blackness is not always a sign of racial codification (as the term film noir admits): its representational aura in auteurist and avant-garde traditions conventionally serves to mark off the status of the author (as white subject of enun-

ciation) in relation to the discourse authorised in the text (as black subject of the statement). Ethnic alterity is a consistent trope of modernist differentiation in various Euro-American canons: the play of black signs that inscribe the authorial voice self-referentially in Jonathan Demme’s *Something Wild* can be seen as drawing on elements of the romanticist image-reservoir, where blackness is valorised as emblematic of outsidersness and oppositionality, that might be read off Jean Genet’s *Chant d’amour* (1953), Jean-Luc Godard’s *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil* (1969) or Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976). This arbitrary list (indexing disparate debates on independent film-making 32) is made merely to point out another set of questions; namely, how to differentiate diverse appropriations of the same stock of signs and meanings built up around different discursive formations of ‘race’ and ethnicity? This question bears upon the broader underlying issue of the multi-accentual nature of the signs characteristic of the flashpoints of ideological contestation and cultural struggle 33. It also alludes to the paradox identified in Richard Dyer’s reading of Paul Robeson as a cinematic icon that meant different things to racially differentiated readers:

*Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things – spontaneity, emotion, naturalness – yet giving them a different implication. Black discourses see them as contributions to the development of society, white as enviable qualities that only blacks have.* 34

The issue of ‘envy’ confirms that white identifications are as problematic (conceptually) as the ability of black readers – or readers of subaltern status – to appropriate alternative ‘subtextual’ readings from the racial discourse of dominant cultural texts. *King Kong* – to cite one of the most centred mythologies of modern popular cinema – has been read as the tragic story of a heroic beast and/or the fate of a black man punished for the transgressive coupling with the white woman that he/the monster desires. These questions appear to be ‘new’, hence very difficult, yet we have returned, by a rather circuitous route, to the hotly contested terrain of the debates on class and culture, hegemony and subjectivity that were territorialised with such passion in the mid-’70s. 35 We must conclude that this cannot possibly be the last word on ‘race’ as these complicated issues are only now coming into view as a result of the critical dialogue that has engaged with the blind spots and insights of earlier conversations. And further, that such dialogism is a necessary discursive condition for understanding contestation in film culture and other formations of cultural practice and cultural politics.

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