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THE COMMITMENT TO THEORY

I

In August 1986, the Edinburgh International Film Festival staged a three-day conference on 'Third Cinema' organized by Jim Pines, June Givanni and Paul Willemen. The concerns of the conference were publicized in these terms:

> *With the major political and economic changes experienced in both the Euro-American and so-called Third World since the late '70s, the issue of cultural specificity (the need to know which specific social-historical processes are at work in the generation of cultural products) and the question of how precisely social existence overdetermines cultural practices have taken on a new and crucial importance. The complexity of the shifting dynamics between intra- and international differences and power relations has shown simple models of class domination at home and imperialism abroad to be totally inadequate.*

Papers by many of the international contributors - both film-makers and theorists — will soon be published in Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds), Third Cinema *(London: BFI). This article, based on one of the concluding papers, develops a political response to some of the debates that emerged at Edinburgh.*

There was a damaging and self-defeating assumption circulating at the Edinburgh 'Third Cinema' Conference - and in many influential places beyond it - that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged. It is said that the place of the academic critic is inevitably within the Eurocentric archives of an imperialist or neo-colonial West. The Olympian realms of what is mistakenly labelled 'pure theory' are assumed to be eternally insulated from the historical exigencies and tragedies of the wretched of the earth. I believe it ain't necessarily so. Must we always polarize in order to polemicize? Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take no other form than a binarism of theory vs. politics? Can the aim of freedom or knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, margin and periphery, negative image and positive image? Is our only way out of such dualism the espousal of an implacable oppositionality or the invention of an originary counter-myth of radical purity? Must the project of our liberationist aesthetics be for ever part of a totalizing, Utopian vision of Being and History that seeks to transcend the contradictions and ambivalences that constitute the very structure of human subjectivity and its systems of cultural representation?

Deep within the vigorous knock-about that ensued, at times, at Edinburgh, between what was represented as the 'larsony' and distortion of European

'metatheorizing' and the radical, engaged, activist experience of Third World creativity,[1] I could see the mirror image (albeit reversed in content and intention) of that ahistorical nineteenth-century polarity of Orient and Occident which, in the name of progress, unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other. This time round, the term 'critical theory', often untheorized and unargued, was definitely the Other, an otherness that was insistently identified with the vagaries of the 'depoliticized' Eurocentric critic. Was the cause of radical art or critique best served by the fulminating professor of film who announced, at a flashpoint in the argument, 'We are not artists, we are political activists'? By obscuring the power of his own practice in the rhetoric of militancy, he failed to draw attention to the specific value of a politics of cultural production which, because it makes the surfaces of cinematic signification the grounds of political intervention, gives depth to the language of social criticism and extends the domain of 'politics' in a direction that will not be entirely dominated by the forces of economic or social control. Forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through the identification with oppositional *cultural* practices.

Before I am accused of bourgeois voluntarism, liberal pragmatism, academicist pluralism and all the other -isms that are freely bandied about by those who take the most severe exception to 'Eurocentric' theoretidsm (Derrideanism, Lacanianism, post-structuralism . . .), I would like to clarify the goals of my opening questions. I am convinced that, in the language of political economy, it is legitimate to represent the relations of exploitation and domination in the discursive division between First and Third Worlds. Despite the claims to a spurious rhetoric of 'internationalism' on the part of the established multinationals and the networks of the new communication technology industries, such circulations of signs and commodities as there are, are caught in the vicious circuits of surplus value that link First World capital to Third World labour markets through the chains of the international division of labour. Spivak is right to conclude that it 'is in the interest of capital to preserve the comprador theatre in a state of relatively primitive labour legislation and environmental regulation':[2] remember Bhopal.

I am equally convinced that in the language of international diplomacy there is a sharp growth in a new Anglo-American nationalism (NATO-nalism?) that increasingly articulates its economic and military power in political acts that express a neo-imperialist disregard for the independence and autonomy of Other peoples and places, largely in the Third World. Think of America's 'backyard' policy towards the Caribbean and Latin America, the patriotic gore and patrician lore of Britain's Falkland Campaign, or the triumphalism of the American and British navies patrolling the Persian Gulf (July 1987). I am further convinced that such economic and political domination has a profound hegemonic influence on the information orders of the Western world, its popular media and its specialized institutions and academies. So much is not in doubt.

What does demand further discrimination is whether the 'new' languages of theoretical critique (semiotic, post-structuralist, deconstructionist etc.) simply reflect those geopolitical divisions and spheres of influence. Are the interests of

'Western' theory necessarily collusive with the hegemonic role of the West as a power bloc? Is the specialized, 'textualized', often academic language of theory merely another power ploy of the culturally privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the Other that sutures its own power-knowledge equation?

A large film festival in the West - even an alternative or counter-cultural event such as Edinburgh's 'Third Cinema' Conference - never fails to reveal the disproportionate influence of the West as cultural forum, in all three senses of that word: as place of public exhibition and discussion, as place of judgement, and as market-place. An Indian film about the plight of Bombay's pavement-dwellers wins the Newcastle Festival which then opens up distribution facilities in India. The first searing expose of the Bhopal disaster is made for Channel Four. A major debate on the politics and theory of Third Cinema first appears in *Screen.* An archival article on the important history of neo-traditionalism and the 'popular' in Indian cinema sees the light of day in *Framework.*[1] Among the major contributors to the development of the Third Cinema as precept and practice are a number of Third World film-makers and critics who are exiles or emigres to the West and live problematically, often dangerously, on the 'left' margins of a Eurocentric, bourgeois, liberal culture. I don't think I need to add individual names or places, or detail the historical reasons why the West carries and exploits what Bourdieu would call its symbolic capital. The condition is all too familiar, and it is not my purpose here to make those important distinctions between different national situations and the disparate political causes and collective histories of cultural exile. I want to take my stand on the shifting margins of cultural displacement - that confounds any profound or 'authentic' sense of a 'national' culture or an 'organic' intellectual - and ask what the function of a committed theoretical perspective might be, once the cultural and historical hybridity of the post-colonial world is taken as the paradigmatic place of departure. . . .

Committed to what? At this stage in the argument, I do not want to identify any specific 'object' of political allegiance - the Third World, the working class, the feminist struggle. Although such an objectification of political activity is crucial and must significantly inform political debate, it is not the only option for those critics or intellectuals who are committed to progressive, political change in the direction of a socialist society. It is a sign of political maturity to accept that there are many forms of political writing whose different effects are obscured when they are divided between the 'theoretical' and the 'activist'. It is not as if the leaflet involved in the organization of a strike is short on theory, while a speculative article on the theory of ideology ought to have more practical examples or applications. They are both forms of discourse and to that extent they produce rather than reflect their objects of reference. The difference between them lies in their operational qualities. The leaflet has a specific expository and organizational purpose, temporally bound to the event; the theory of ideology makes its contribution to those embedded political ideas and principles that inform the right to strike. The latter does not justify the former; nor does it necessarily precede it. It exists side by side with it - the one as an enabling part of the other - like the recto and verso of a sheet of paper, to use a common semiotic analogy in the uncommon context of politics.

My concern here is with the process of 'intervening ideologically', as Stuart Hall describes the role of 'imaging' or representation in the practice of politics in his response to the British election of 1987.[4] For Hall, the notion of hegemony implies a politics of *identification* or the imaginary. This occupies a discursive space which is not exclusively delimited by the history of either the right or the left. It exists somehow in between these political polarities, and also between the familiar divisions of theory and political practice. This approach, as I read it, introduces us to an exciting, neglected moment, or movement, in the 'recognition' of the relation of politics to theory; and confuses the traditional differences between them. Such a movement is initiated if we see that relation as determined by the rule of repeatable materiality, which Foucault describes as the process by which statements from one institution can be transcribed in the discourse of another[5]. Despite the schemata of use and application that constitute a field of stabilization for the statement, any change in the statement's conditions of use and reinvestment, any alteration in its field of experience or verification, or, indeed, any difference in the problems to be solved, can lead to the emergence of a new statement: the difference of the same.

In what hybrid forms, then, may a politics of the theoretical statement emerge? What tensions and ambivalences mark this enigmatic place from which theory 'speaks'? Speaking in the name of some counter-authority or horizon of 'the true' (in Foucault's sense of the strategic effects of any apparatus or *dispositif),* the theoretical enterprise has to represent the adversarial authority (of power and/or knowledge) which, in a doubly-inscribed move, it simultaneously seeks to subvert and replace. In this complicated formulation I have tried to indicate something of the complex boundary and location of the event of theoretical critique which does not *contain* the truth (in polar opposition to totalitarianism, 'bourgeois liberalism' or whatever is supposed to repress it). The 'true' is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself, the productivity of meanings that construct counter-knowledges *in medias res,* in the very act of agonism, within the terms of a negotiation (rather than a negation) of oppositional and antagonistic elements. Political positions are not simply identifiable as progressive or reactionary, bourgeois or radical, prior to the act of *critique engagee,* or outside the terms and conditions of its discursive and textual address. It is in this sense that the historical moment of political action must necessarily be thought as part of the history of the form of its writing. This is not to state the obvious, that there is no knowledge - political or otherwise - outside representation. It is to suggest that the dynamics of writing - of *ecriture* - require us to rethink the logics of causality or determinacy through which we recognize the 'political' as a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation.

'What is to be done?' must acknowledge the force of writing, its metaphoricity and its rhetorical discourse, as a productive matrix which defines the 'social' and makes it available as an objective of/for action. Textuality is not simply a second-order ideological expression or a verbal symptom of a pre-given political subject. That the political subject - as indeed the subject of politics - is a discursive event is nowhere more clearly seen than in a text which has been a formative influence on Western liberal democratic and socialist discourse -

Mill's essay *On Liberty*. His crucial chapter, 'On the liberty of thought and discussion', is almost entirely an attempt to define political judgement as the problem of finding a form of *public rhetoric* able to represent different and opposing political 'contents' or principles as a dialogical exchange in the ongoing present of the enunciation of the political statement. What is unexpected is the suggestion that it is a crisis of identification initiated in the textual performance that displays a certain 'difference' *within* the signification of any single political system, prior to the substantial differences *between* political beliefs. A knowledge can only become political through an agonistic language-game: dissensus, alterity and otherness are the discursive conditions for the circulation and recognition of a politicized subject and a public 'truth':

> [If] opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them. . . . [He] must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of; *else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty*. . . . Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they know: they have never thrown themselves into the *mental position* of those who think differently from them . . . and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, *know the doctrine which they themselves profess.* (My emphasis)[6]

It is true that Mill's 'rationality' permits, or requires, such forms of contention and contradiction in order to enhance his vision of the inherently progressive and evolutionary bent of *human* judgement. (This makes it possible for contradictions to be resolved and also generates a sense of the whole truth which reflects the natural, organic bent of the human mind.) It is also true that Mill always reserves, in society as in his argument, the unreal neutral space of the Third Person as the representative of the 'people', who witnesses the debate from an 'epistemological distance' and draws a reasonable conclusion. Even so, in his attempt to describe the political as a form of debate and dialogue - as the process of public rhetoric - that is crucially mediated through this ambivalent and antagonistic faculty of a political 'imagination', Mill exceeds the usual mimetic sense of the battle of ideas. He suggests something much more dialogical: the realization of the political idea at the ambivalent point of textual address, its emergence through a form of political fantasy. Rereading Mill through the strategies of 'writing' that I have suggested above reveals that one cannot passively follow the line of argument running through the logic of the opposing ideology. The textual process of political antagonism initiates a contradictory process of reading 'between the lines'; the agent of the discourse becomes, in the same time of utterance, the inverted, projected, fantasmatic object of the argument, 'turned against itself. It is, Mill insists, only by effectively assuming the mental position of the antagonist and working through the displacing and decentring force of that discursive difficulty, that the politicized 'portion of truth' is produced. This is a different dynamic from the ethic of 'tolerance' in liberal ideology which has to imagine opposition in order to contain it and demonstrate its enlightened relativism or humanism. Reading Mill against the grain like this suggests that politics can only become

'representative', a truly *public* discourse, through a splitting in the signification of the subject of representation, through an ambivalence at the point of the enunciation of a politics.

I have chosen to demonstrate the importance of the space of writing and the problematic of address at the very heart of the liberal tradition, because it is here that the myth of the 'transparency' of the human agent and the reasonableness of political action is most forcefully asserted. Despite the more radical political alternatives of the right and the left, the popular, common-sense view of the place of the individual in relation to the social is still substantially thought and lived in ethical terms moulded by liberal beliefs. What the question of writing reveals most starkly are the ambivalent and fantasmatic texts that make 'the political' possible. From such a perspective, the problematic of political judgement cannot be represented as an epistemological problem of 'appearance and reality' or 'theory and practice' or 'word and thing'. Nor can it be represented as a dialectical problem or a symptomatic contradiction constitutive of the materiality of the 'real' whose difference must be sublated in the progress of history or the political science of Marxism. On the contrary, we are made excruciatingly aware of the ambivalent juxtaposition, the dangerous interstitial, invaginated relation of the 'factual' and the 'fantasmatic', and, beyond that, of the crucial function of the fantasmatic and the rhetorical - those vicissitudes of the movement of the signifier - in the fixing of the 'factual', in the 'closure' of the real, in the efficacy and power of strategic thinking in the discourses of *Realpolitik.* It is this to-and-fro, this *fort/da* of the symbolic process of political negotiation, that we are challenged to think in, and through, what I have called a politics of address. The question of writing and address focuses on the necessity of this ambivalent movement in the construction of political authority, in the fixity and fixation of boundaries of meaning and strategies of action. Its importance goes beyond its unsettling, from the point of view of philosophy, of the essentialism or logocentricism of a received political tradition, in the name of an abstract 'free play of the signifier'.

The first principles of a socialist critique will appear contentious and contradictory to a bourgeois humanist reading, as indeed will be the political intentions of the critic. So much is obvious. In the act of the *ecriture* or scription of an oppositional reading, however, we must not expect to recognize the *new* political object, or aim, or knowledge, as simply a mimetic reflection of the *a priori* principle or commitment. Nor should we demand of it a pure teleology of analysis or purport whereby the prior principle is simply augmented, its rationality smoothly developed, its identity as 'socialist' or 'materialist' (as opposed to 'neo-imperialist' or 'humanist') consistently confirmed in each oppositional stage of the argument. Such identikit political idealism may be the symptom of great individual fervour, but it lacks the deeper, if dangerous, sense of what is entailed by the *passage* of history in theoretical discourse. The language of critique is effective not because it keeps for ever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of 'translation': a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the Other,* properly alienates

our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the 'moment' of politics. The challenge lies in conceiving of the 'time' of political action and understanding as opening up a space that can accept and regulate the differential structure of the moment of intervention without rushing to produce a dialectical unity of the social antagonism or contradiction. This must be a sign that history is *happening* - within the windless pages of theory, within the systems and structures we construct to figure the passage of the historical.

When I talk of *negotiation* rather than *negation*, it is to convey a temporality that makes it possible to conceptualize the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements without either the idealism of a dialectic which enables the emergence of a teleological or transcendent History, or the 'scienticism' of symptomatic reading where the nervous tics on the surface of ideology reveal the 'real materialist contradiction' that History embodies. In such a temporality, the act of theory is the process of articulation, and the event of theory becomes the *negotiation* of contradictory and antagonistic instances. These open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle and destroy those familiar polarities between knowledge and its objects, and between theory and practical-political reason.[7] If I have argued against a primordial and previsionary division of 'right' or 'left', progressive or reactionary, it has been only to stress the fully historical and discursive *differance* between them. I would not like my notion of negotiation to be confused with some syndicalist sense of 'reformism' because that is not the political level that is being explored here. By negotiation I attempt to draw attention to the structure of *iteration* that informs political movements (in both senses of the word), that attempt to articulate antagonistic and oppositional elements without the redemptive rationality of sublation or transcendence.[8]

The temporality of negotiation or translation as I have sketched it has two main advantages. First, it acknowledges the historical connectedness between the subject and object of critique so that there can be no simplistic, essentialist opposition between ideological miscognition and revolutionary truth. The progressive 'reading' is crucially determined by the adversarial or agonistic situation itself; it is effective because it uses the subversive, messy mask of camouflage and does not come like a pure avenging angel speaking the truth of a radical historicity and pure oppositionality. If one is aware of this heterogeneous emergence (not origin) of radical critique, then - and this is my second point - the function of theory within the political process becomes double-edged. It makes us aware that our political referents and priorities - the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference, the assertion of an anti-imperialist, black or third perspective - are not 'there' in some primordial, naturalistic sense. Nor do they reflect a unitary or homogeneous political object. They 'make sense' as they come to be constructed in the discourses of feminism or Marxism or the Third Cinema or whatever, whose objects of priority - class or sexuality or 'the new ethnicity' (Stuart Hall) - are always in historical and philosophical tension, or cross-reference with other objectives.

Indeed, the whole history of socialist thought which seeks to 'make it new and better' seems to be a difficult process of articulating priorities whose political objects can be recalcitrant and contradictory. Within contemporary Marxism,

for example, witness the continual tension between the 'English', humanist, labourist faction and the 'theoreticist', structuralist, 'Trotskyist' tendencies. Within feminism, there is again a marked difference of emphasis between the psychoanalytic/semiotic end and those who see the articulation of gender and class as less problematic through a theory of cultural and ideological interpellation. I have presented these differences in broad brush-strokes often using the language of polemic, to suggest that each 'position' is always a process of translation and transference of meaning. Each objective is constructed on the trace of that perspective that it puts 'under erasure'; each political object is displacing in relation to the other, and displaced in that critical act. Too often these theoretical issues are peremptorily transposed into organizational terms and represented as 'sectarianism'. I am suggesting that such contradictions and conflicts, which often thwart political intentions and make the question of commitment complex and difficult, are rooted in the process of translation and displacement in which the 'object' of politics is inscribed. The effect is not stasis or a sapping of the will. It is, on the contrary, the spur to the 'negotiation' of socialist democratic politics and policies which demand that questions of organization are theorized and socialist theory is 'organized', *because there is no given community or body of the people, whose inherent, radical historicity emits the right signs.*

This emphasis on the representation of the political, on the construction of discourse, is the radical contribution of the 'translation' of theory whose vigilance never allows a simple identity between the political objective (not object) and its means of representation. This emphasis on the necessity of heterogeneity and the double inscription of the political objective is not merely the repetition of a general truth about discourse introduced into the political field. In denying an essentialist logic and a mimetic referent to political representation it is a strong, principled argument against political separatism of any colour, that cuts through the moralism that usually accompanies such claims. There is literally, and figuratively, no space for the 'unitary' or single political objective which offends against the sense of a socialist *community* of interest and articulation.

In Britain, in the 1980s, no political struggle was fought more powerfully and sustained more poignantly on the values and traditions of a socialist community than the miners' strike of 1984-5. The battalions of monetarist figures and forecasts on the 'profitability' of the pits were starkly ranged against the most illustrious standards of the British labour movement, the most cohesive cultural communities of the working class. The choice was clearly between the dawning world of the new 'Thatcherite' city gent and a long history of 'the working man', or so it seemed to the traditional left and the new right. In these class terms the 'mining' women involved in the strike were applauded for the heroic supporting role they played, for their endurance and initiative. But the 'revolutionary' impulse, it seemed, belonged securely to the working-class male. Then, to commemorate the first anniversary of the strike, Beatrix Campbell, in the *Guardian,* interviewed a group of women who had been involved in the strike. It was clear that their experience of the historical struggle, their understanding of the 'historic' choice, was startlingly different and more

complex. Their testimonies would not be contained simply or singly within the priorities of the politics of class or the histories of industrial struggle. Many of the women began to question their roles within the family and the community - the two central institutions which articulated the meanings and mores of the *tradition* of the labouring classes around which ideological battle was enjoined. Some challenged the symbols and authorities of the culture they fought to defend. Others disrupted the homes they had struggled to sustain. For most of them there was no return, no going back to the 'good old days'. It would be simplistic to suggest either that this considerable social change was a spin-off from the class struggle or that it was a repudiation of the politics of class from a socialist-feminist perspective. There is no simple political or social 'truth' to be learned, for there is no unitary representation of a political agency, no fixed hierarchy of political values and effects.

My illustration attempts to display the importance of the 'hybrid' moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender) *but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both. This does not necessarily involve the formation of a new synthesis, but a negotiation between them *in medias res,* in the profound experience or knowledge of the displaced, diversionary, differentiated boundaries in which the limits and limitations of social power are encountered in an agonistic relation. When Eric Hobsbawm suggests in *Marxism Today* (October 1987) that the Labour Party should seek to produce a socialist alliance among progressive forces that are widely dispersed and distributed across a range of class, culture, and occupational forces - without a unifying sense of the 'class for itself - he is acknowledging, as *historical* necessity, the kind of 'hybridity' that I have attempted to identify as a practice in the signification of the political. A little less pietistic articulation of political principle (around class and nation); just a little more of the principle of 'political' articulation. . . .

This seems to be the theoretical issue at the heart of Stuart Hall's arguments for the construction of a counter-hegemonic power bloc through which a socialist party might construct its majority, its constituency; and the Labour Party might (in)conceivably improve its 'image'. The unemployed, semi-skilled and unskilled, part-time workers, male and female, the low-paid, black people, underclasses: these signs of the fragmentation of class and cultural consensus represent, for Hall, both the historical experience of contemporary social divisions, and a structure of heterogeneity upon which to construct his theoretical and political alternative. That is, for Hall, the imperative to construct a new social bloc of different constituencies, through the production of a form of symbolic identification that would result in a collective will. The Labour Party, with its desire to reinstate its traditionalist image - white, male, working-class, trade-union based - is not 'hegemonic enough', Hall writes. He is right; what remains unanswered is whether the rationalism and intentionality that propel the 'collective will' are compatible with the language of symbolic image' and fragmentary identification which represent, for Hall and for his 'hegemony'/'counter-hegemony', the fundamental political issues. Can there

ever be hegemony 'enough', except in the sense that a two-thirds majority will elect us a socialist government?

It is in intervening in Hall's argument that the necessities of 'negotiation' are revealed, in my attempt to foreground his analytic of fragmentation. The interest and excitement of Hall's position lie in his acknowledgement, remarkable for the British left, that, though influential, 'material interests on their own have no necessary class belongingness'.[9] This has two significant effects. It enables Hall to see the agents of political change as discontinuous, divided subjects caught in conflicting interests and identities. Equally, at the historical level of a Thatcherite 'population', he asserts that divisive rather than solidary forms of identification are the rule resulting in undecidabilities and aporia of political judgement:

> What does a working woman put first? Which of her identities is the one that determines her political choices?

The answer to such a question is defined, according to Hall, in the ideological definition of materialist interests; a process of symbolic identification achieved through a political technology of 'imaging' that hegemonically produces a social bloc of the right or the left. Not only is the social bloc heterogeneous but the work of hegemony - as I see it - is itself the process of iteration and differentiation. It depends on the production of alternative or antagonistic images that are always produced side by side and in competition with each other. It is this side-by-side nature, this partial presence or metonymy of antagonism, and its effective significations, that give meaning (quite literally) to a politics of struggle *as the struggle of identifications* and the war of positions. It is therefore problematic to think of it as sublated into an image of the collective will.

Hegemony requires iteration and alterity to be effective, to be productive of politicized populations: the (non-homogeneous) symbolic-social bloc needs to represent itself in a solidary 'collective' will - a modern image of the future - if those populations are to produce a progressive government. Both may be necessary but they do not easily follow from each other, for in each case the mode of representation and its temporality are different. The contribution of negotiation is to display the 'in-between' of this crucial argument that is *not* self-contradictory, but significantly performs, in the process of its discussion, the problems of judgement and identification that inform the political space of its enunciation. For the moment, the act of negotiation will only be interrogatory. Can such split subjects and differentiated social movements, which display ambivalent and divided forms of identification, be represented in a 'collective will' that distinctively echoes Gramsci's enlightenment inheritance and its rationalism?[10] How does the language of the will accommodate the vicissitudes of its representation, which is its construction through a symbolic majority where the have-nots identify themselves from the position of the haves? How do we construct a politics based on such a displacement of affect or strategic elaboration (Foucault), where political positioning is ambivalently grounded in an acting-out of political fantasies that require repeated passages across the

differential boundaries between one symbolic bloc *and an other,* and the positions available to each? If such is the case, then how do we fix the counter-image of socialist hegemony to reflect the divided will, the fragmented population? If the polity of hegemony is, quite literally, *unsigmfiable* without the metonymic representation of its agonistic and ambivalent structure of articulation, then how does the collective will stabilize and unify its address as an agency of *representation,* as representative of a 'people'? How do we avoid the mixing or overlap of images, the split screen, the failure to synchronize sound and image? Perhaps we need to change the ocular language of the image in order to talk of the social and political identifications or representations of a 'people' - it is worth noting that Laclau and Mouffe have turned to the language of textuality and discourse, to *differance* and enunciative modalities, in attempting to understand the structure of hegemony.[11] Paul Gilroy also refers to Bakhtin's theory of narrative when he describes the performance of black expressive cultures as an attempt to transform the relationship between performer and crowd 'in *dialogic* rituals so that spectators acquire the active role of participants in collective processes which are sometimes cathartic and which may symbolize or even create a community' (my emphasis).[12]

Such negotiations between politics and theory make it impossible to think of the place of the theoretical as a metanarrative claiming a more total form of generality. Nor is it possible to claim a certain, familiar 'epistemological' distance between the *time and place* of the intellectual and the activist, as Fanon suggests when he observes that 'while politicians situate their action in actual present-day events, men of culture take their stand in the field of history'.[13] It is precisely that popular binarism between theory and politics, whose foundational basis is an epistemological view of knowledge as totalizing generality and everyday life as experience, subjectivity, or false consciousness, that I have tried to erase. It is a distinction that even Sartre subscribes to when he describes the committed intellectual as 'the theoretician of practical knowledge' whose defining criterion is rationality and whose first project is to combat the irrationality of ideology.[14] From the perspective of negotiation and translation, *contra* Fanon and Sartre, there can be no final discursive *closure* of theory. It does not foreclose on the political, even though battles for power-knowledge may be won or lost to great effect. The corollary is that there is no first or final act of revolutionary social (or socialist) transformation - just as, in Lacan's account of the process of subjectivity in language, there is no fixed point of identity, for the 'signifier represents a subject for another signifier'.

I hope it is clear that this erasure of the traditional boundary between theory/ politics, and my resistance to the *en-closure* of the theoretical whether it is read negatively as elitism or positively as radical supra-rationality, do not turn on the good or bad faith of the activist agent or the intellectual *agent provocateur.* I am primarily concerned with the conceptual structuring of the terms - the 'theoretical' / the 'political' - which inform a range of debates around the place and time of the committed intellectual. I have therefore argued for a certain relation to knowledge which I think is crucial in structuring our sense of what the *object* of theory may be in the act of determining our specific political *objectives.*

II

What is at stake in the naming of critical theory as 'Western'? It is, obviously, a designation of institutional power and ideological Eurocentricity. Critical theory often engages with Third World texts within the familiar traditions and conditions of colonial anthropology either to 'universalize' their meaning within its own cultural and academic discourse, or to sharpen its internal critique of the Western logocentric sign, the idealist 'subject', or indeed the illusions and delusions of civil society. This is a familiar manoeuvre of theoretical knowledge, where, having opened up the chasm of cultural 'difference' - of the indeterminacy *of* meaning or the slippage of the signifier - a mediator or metaphor of 'otherness' must be found to contain that 'difference'. In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to 'foreclose' on the Other; the 'Other' thus becomes at once the 'fantasy' of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological 'edge' of the West. More significantly, the site of cultural difference becomes the mere phantom of a dire disciplinary struggle in which it has no space or power. Montesquieu's Turkish Despot, Barthes's Japan, Kristeva's China, Derrida's Nambikwara Indians, Lyotard's Cashinahua 'pagans' are part of this strategy of containment where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation. The 'Other' is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot-reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. Narrative and the *cultural* politics of difference become the closed circle of interpretation. The 'Other' loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its 'desire', to split its 'sign' of identity, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. However impeccably the content of an 'other' culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is its *location* as the 'closure' of grand theories, the demand that, in analytical terms, it be always the 'good' object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination and is the most serious indictment of the institutional powers of critical theory.

There is, however, a distinction to be made between the institutional history of critical theory and its conceptual potential for change and innovation. Althusser's critique of the temporal structure of the Hegelian-Marxist expressive 'totality', despite its functionalist limitations, opens up the possibilities of thinking the 'relations of production' in a time of differential histories. Lacan's location of the signifier of desire, on the cusp of language and the law, allows the elaboration of a form of social representation that is alive to the ambivalent structure of subjectivity and sociality. Foucault's archaeology of the emergence of modern, Western 'man' as a problem of finitude, inextricable from its afterbirth, its Other, enables the linear, progressivist claims of the social sciences - the major imperializing discourses - to be confronted by their own historicist limitations. These arguments and modes of analysis can be dismissed as internal squabbles around Hegelian causality, psychic representation, or sociological theory. Alternatively, they can be subjected to a translation, a 'transformation of value' as part of the questioning of the project of modernity

in the great, revolutionary tradition of C. L. R. James *contra* Trotsky, or Fanon, *contra* phenomenology and existentialist psychoanalysis. In 1952, it was Fanon who suggested that an oppositional, differential reading of Lacan's Other might be more relevant for the colonial condition than the marxisant reading of the master-slave dialectic.

It may be possible to produce such a translation or transformation if we understand the tension within critical theory between its institutional containment and its revisionary force. The continual reference to the horizon of Other cultures which I have mentioned earlier is ambivalent. It is a site of 'citation', but it is also a sign that such critical theory cannot for ever sustain its position in the Western academy as the adversarial cutting edge of Western idealism. What is required is to demonstrate another territory of translation, another testimony of analytical argument, a different engagement in the politics of and around cultural domination. What this other site for theory might be will become clearer if we first see that many of these post-structuralist ideas are themselves opposed to Western Enlightenment humanism and aesthetics. They constitute no less than a deconstruction of the moment of the modern, its legal values, its literary tastes, its philosophical and political categorical imperatives. Secondly, we must rehistoricize the moment of 'the emergence of the sign', or 'the question of the subject', or the 'discursive construction of social reality', to quote a few popular topics of contemporary theory. And this can only happen if we relocate the referential and institutional demands of such theoretical work in the field of cultural difference - *not cultural diversity.*

Such a reorientation may be found in the historical texts of the colonial moment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For at the same time as the question of cultural difference emerged in the colonial text, discourses of 'civility' were defining the doubling moment of the emergence of Western modernity. Thus the political and theoretical genealogy of modernity lies not only in the origins of the *idea* of civility, but in this history of the colonial moment. It is to be found in the resistance of the colonized population to the Word of God and Man - Christianity and the English language. The transmutations and translations of indigenous traditions in their opposition to colonial authority demonstrate how the 'desire of the signifier', the 'indeterminacy' of intertextuality, is deeply engaged in the struggle against dominant relations of power and knowledge. In the following words of the missionary master we hear, quite distinctly, the oppositional voices of a culture of resistance; but we also hear the uncertain and threatening process of cultural transformation. I quote from A. Duff's influential *India Missions* (1839):

> Come to some doctrine which you believe to be peculiar to Revelation; tell the people that they must be regenerated or born again, else they can never 'see God'. Before you are aware, they may go away saying, 'Oh, there is nothing new or strange here; our own Shastras tell us the same thing; we know and believe that we must be born again; it is our fate to be so.' But what do they understand by the expression? It is that they are to be born again and again, in some other form, agreeably to their own system of transmigration or reiterated births. To avoid the appearance of countenancing so absurd and

> pernicious a doctrine, you vary your language, and tell them that there must be a second birth - that they must be twice-born. Now it so happens that this, and all similar phraseology, is preoccupied. The sons of a Brahman have to undergo various purificatory and initiatory ceremonial rites, before they attain to full Brahmanhood. The last of these is the investiture with the sacred thread; which is followed by the communication of the Gayatri, or most sacred verse in the Vedas. This ceremonial constitutes, 'religiously and metaphorically, their second birth'; henceforward their distinctive and peculiar appellation is that of the twice-born, or regenerated men. *Hence it is your improved language might only convey the impression that all must become perfect Brahmans, ere they can 'see God'.* (My emphasis)

The grounds of evangelical certitude are opposed not by the simple assertion of an antagonistic cultural tradition. The process of translation is the opening up of another contentious political and cultural site at the heart of colonial 'representation'. Here the word of divine authority is deeply flawed by the assertion of the indigenous sign and in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid - neither the one thing nor the other. The incalculable colonized subject - half acquiescent, half oppositional, always untrustworthy - produces an unresolvable problem of cultural difference for the very address of colonial cultural authority. The 'subtile system of Hinduism', as the missionaries in the early nineteenth century called it, generated tremendous policy implications for the institutions of Christian conversion. The written authority of the Bible was challenged and together with it a post-Enlightenment notion of the evidence of Christianity and its historical priority, which was central to evangelical colonialism. The Word could no longer be trusted to carry the truth when written or spoken in the colonial world by the European missionary. Native catechists therefore had to be found, who brought with them their own cultural and political ambivalences and contradictions, often under great pressure from their families and communities.

This revision of the history of critical theory rests, I have said, on the notion of cultural difference, not cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is an epistemological object - culture as an object of empirical knowledge - whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as 'knowledgeafe/e', authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity. Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural 'contents' and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity. Cultural diversity may even emerge as a system of the articulation and exchange of cultural signs in certain early structuralist accounts of anthropology.

Through the concept of cultural difference I want to draw attention to the common ground and lost territory of contemporary critical debates. For they all recognize that the problem of the cultural emerges only at the significatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated. Yet the reality of the limit or limit-text of culture is rarely theorized outside of well-intentioned moralist polemics against prejudice and stereotype, or the blanket assertion of individual or institutional racism - that describes the effect rather than the structure of the problem. The need to think the limit of culture as a problem of the enunciation of cultural difference is disavowed.

The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority; the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation. And it is the very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth which is at issue in the concept and moment of *enunciation.* The enunciative process introduces a split in the performative present, of cultural identification; a split between the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference - and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance. The struggle is often between the teleological or mythical time and narrative of traditionalism - of the right or the left - and the shifting, strategically displaced time of the articulation of a historical politics of negotiation which I suggested above. The time of liberation is, as Fanon powerfully evokes, a time of cultural uncertainty, and, most crucially, of significatory or representational undecidability:

> But [native intellectuals] forget that the forms of thought and what [they] feed . . .on, together with modern techniques of information, language and dress have dialectically reorganised the people's intelligences and *the constant principles (of national art)* which acted as safeguards during the colonial period are now undergoing extremely radical changes. . . . [We] must join the people in that fluctuating movement which they *are just* giving a shape to . . . which will be the signal for everything to be called into question ... it is to the zone of *occult instability* where the people dwell that we must come. (My emphasis)[15]

The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. That iteration negates our sense of the origins of the struggle. It undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols 3nd icons, by questioning our sense of the authority of cultural synthesis in general.

This demands that we rethink our perspective on the identity of culture. Here Fanon's passage - somewhat reinterpreted - may be helpful. What is implied by

his juxtaposition of the constant national principles with his view of culture-as-political-struggle, which he so enigmatically and beautifully describes as 'the zone of occult instability where the people dwell'? These ideas not only help to explain the nature of colonial struggle. They also suggest a possible critique of the positive aesthetic and political values we ascribe to the unity or totality of cultures, especially those that have known long and tyrannical histories of domination and misrecognition. Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other. This is not because of some humanistic nostrum that beyond individual cultures we all belong to the human culture of mankind; nor is it because of an ethical relativism that suggests that in our cultural capacity to speak of and judge Others we necessarily 'place ourselves in their position', in a kind of relativism of distance of which Bernard Williams has written at length.[16]

The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation - the *place of utterance* - is crossed by the *differance* of writing or *ecriture.* This has less to do with what anthropologists might describe as varying attitudes to symbolic systems within different cultures than with the structure of symbolic representation - not the content of the symbol or its 'social function', but the structure of symbolization. It is this 'difference' in language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent.

The linguistic difference that informs any cultural performance is dramatized in the common semiotic account of the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition *(enonce)* and the subject of enunciation, which is not represented in the statement but which is the acknowledgement of its discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space. The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. The pronominal I of the proposition cannot be made to address - in its own words - the subject of enunciation, for this is not 'personable', but remains a spatial relation within the schemata and strategies of discourse. The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the Other. This ambivalence is emphasized when we realize that there is no way that the content of the proposition will reveal the structure of its positionality; no way that context can be mimetically read off from the content.

The implication of this enunciative split for cultural analysis that I especially want to emphasize is its temporal dimension. The splitting of the subject of enunciation destroys the logics of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge. It is taken for granted that the value of culture as an object of study and the value of any analytical activity that is considered cultural lie in a capacity to produce a cross-referential, generalizable

unity that signifies a progression or evolution of ideas-in-time, as well as a cultured self-reflection on their premisses. It would not be relevant to pursue the detail of this argument here except to demonstrate - via Marshall Sahlins's *Culture and Practical Reason* - the validity of my general characterization of the Western expectation of culture as a disciplinary practice of writing. I quote Sahlins at the point at which he attempts to define the difference of Western bourgeois culture:

> We have to do not so much with functional dominance as with structural - with different structures of symbolic *integration.* And to this gross difference in design correspond differences in symbolic performance: between an *open, expanding* code, responsive by *continuous* permutation to events it has itself staged, and an apparently *static* one that seems to know not events, but only its own preconceptions. The gross distinction between 'hot' societies and 'cold', development and underdevelopment, societies with and without history - and so between large societies and small, expanding and self-contained, colonizing and colonized. . . . (My emphasis)[17]

The intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation which Benedict Anderson so perceptively describes as being written in homogeneous, serial time.[18]

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. Fanon's vision of revolutionary cultural and political change as a 'fluctuating movement' of occult instability could not be articulated as cultural *practice* without an acknowledgement of this indeterminate space of the subject(s) of enunciation. It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.

Fanon's moving metaphor - when reinterpreted for a theory of cultural signification - enables us to see not only the necessity of theory, but also the restrictive notions of cultural identity with which we burden our visions of political change. For Fanon, the liberatory 'people' who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity. They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation, in the sense in which I have been attempting to recast these words. In the moment of liberatory struggle, the Algerian people destroy the continuities and constancies of the 'nationalist' tradition which provided a

safeguard against colonial cultural imposition. They are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference. The native intellectual who identifies the people with the 'true national culture' will be disappointed. The people are now the very principle of 'dialectical reorganization' and they construct their culture from the national text translated into modern Western forms of information technology, language, dress. The changed political and historical site of enunciation transforms the meanings of the colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future.

> I have been stressing a certain void or misgiving attending every assimilation of contraries - I have been stressing this in order to expose what seems to me a fantastic mythological congruence of elements. . . . And if indeed therefore any real sense is to be made of material change it can only occur with an acceptance of a concurrent void and with a willingness to descend into that void wherein, as it were, one may begin to come into confrontation with a spectre of invocation whose freedom to participate in an alien territory and wilderness has become a necessity for one's reason or salvation.[19]

This meditation by the great Guyanian writer Wilson Harris on the void of misgiving in the textuality of colonial history reveals the cultural and historical dimension of that Third Space of enunciation which I have made the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference. He sees it as accompanying the 'assimilation of contraries' and creating that occult instability which presages powerful cultural changes. It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or post-colonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory - where I have led you - may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity.* To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between,* the space of the *entre* that Derrida has opened up in writing itself- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist, histories of the 'people'. It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this 'Third Space', we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.

NOTES

1 See Clyde Taylor, 'Eurocentrics vs. new thought at Edinburgh', *Framework,* 34 (1987) for an illustration of this style of argument. See particularly footnote I (p. 148) for an exposition of his use of 'larsony' ('the judicious distortion of African truths to fit western prejudices').

2 Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1987), 166-7.

3 See Teshome H. Gabriel, 'Teaching Third World cinema' and Julianne Burton, 'The politics of aesthetic distance - *Sao Bernardo',* both in *Screen,* 24, 2 (March-April 1983), and Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Neo-traditionalism: film as popular art in India',

Framework, 32/33 (1986).

4 Stuart Hall, 'Blue election, election blues', *Marxism Today* (July 1987), 30-5.
5 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972), 102-5.
6 J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Dent & Sons, 1972), 93-4.
7 For a significant elaboration of a similar argument, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), ch. 3.
8 For a philosophical underpinning of some of the concepts I am proposing here, see Rodolphe Gasche, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), especially ch. 6: 'The Otherness of unconditional heterology does not have the purity of principles. It is concerned with the principles' irreducible impurity, with the difference that divides them in themselves against themselves. For this reason it is an impure heterology. But it is also an impure heterology because the medium of Otherness - more and less than negativity - is also a mixed milieu, precisely because the negative no longer dominates it.'
9 Hall, op. cit., 33.
10 I owe this point to Martin Thorn.
11 Laclau and Mouffe, op. cit., ch. 3.
12 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 214.
13 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 [1961]), 168.
14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Politics and Literature* (London: Calder/Boyars, 1973), 16-17.
15 Fanon, op. cit., 182-3.
16 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), ch. 9.
17 Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 19??), 211.
18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), ch. 2.
19 Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer, and Society* (New Beacon, 1973), 60-3.