5 Contesting a racialized regime of representation

So far we have analysed some examples from the archive of racialized representation in western popular culture of different periods (sections 1, 2 and 3), and explored the representational practices of difference and 'otherness' (especially section 4). It is time to turn to the final set of questions posed in our opening pages. Can a dominant regime of representation be challenged, contested or changed? What are the counter-strategies which can begin to subvert the representation process? Can 'negative' ways of
representing racial difference, which abound in our examples, be reversed by a 'positive' strategy? What effective strategies are there? And what are their theoretical underpinnings?

Let me remind you that, theoretically, the argument which enables us to pose this question at all is the proposition (which we have discussed in several places and in many different ways) that meaning can never be finally fixed. If meaning could be fixed by representation, then there would be no change - and so no counter-strategies or interventions. Of course, we do make strenuous efforts to fix meaning - that is precisely what the strategies of stereotyping are aspiring to do, often with considerable success, for a time. But ultimately, meaning begins to slip and slide; it begins to drift, or be wrenched, or inflected into new directions. New meanings are grafted on to old ones. Words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control, and these marginal or submerged meanings come to the surface, allowing different meanings to be constructed, different things to be shown and said. That is why we referred you to the work of Bakhtin and Volosinov in section 1.2. For they have given a powerful impetus to the practice of what has come to be known as trans-coding: taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings (e.g. 'Black is Beautiful').

A number of different trans-coding strategies have been adopted since the 1960s, when questions of representation and power acquired a centrality in the politics of anti-racist and other social movements. We only have space here to consider three of them.

5.1 Reversing the stereotypes

In the discussion of racial stereotyping in the American cinema, we discussed the ambiguous position of Sidney Poitier and talked about an integrationist strategy in US film-making in the 1950s. This strategy, as we said, carried heavy costs. Blacks could gain entry to the mainstream — but only at the cost of adapting to the white image of them and assimilating white norms of style, looks and behaviour. Following the Civil Rights movement, in the 1960s and 70s, there was a much more aggressive affirmation of black cultural identity, a positive attitude towards difference and a struggle over representation.

The first fruit of this counter-revolution was a series of films, beginning with Sweet Sweetback's Baadasss Song (Martin Van Peebles, 1971), and Gordon Parks' box-office success, Shaft. In Sweet Sweetback, Van Peebles values positively all the characteristics which would normally have been negative stereotypes. He made his black hero a professional stud, who successfully evades the police with the help of a succession of black ghetto low-lifers, sets fire to a police car, shafts another with a pool cue, lights out for the Mexican border, making full use of his sexual prowess at every opportunity, and ultimately gets away with it all, to a message scrawled across the screen: 'A BAADASSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES'. Shaft
was about a black detective, close to the streets but struggling with the black underworld and a band of black militants as well as the Mafia, who rescues a black racketeer's daughter. What marked Shaft out, however, was the detective's absolute lack of deference towards whites. Living in a smart apartment, beautifully turned out in casual but expensive clothes, he was presented in the advertising publicity as a 'lone black Super-spade — a man of flair and flamboyance who has fun at the expense of the white establishment'. He was 'a violent man who lived a violent life, in pursuit of black women, white sex, quick money, easy success, cheap 'pot' and other pleasures' (Cripps, 1978, pp. 251-4). When asked by a policeman where he is going, Shaft replies, 'I'm going to get laid. Where are you going?' The instant success of Shaft was followed by a succession of films in the same mould, including Superfly, also by Parks, in which Priest, a young black cocaine dealer, succeeds in making one last big deal before retirement, survives both a series of violent episodes and vivid sexual encounters to drive off at the end in his Rolls Royce, a rich and happy man. There have been many later films in the same mould (e.g. New Jack City) with, at their centre (as the Rap singers would say), 'bad-ass black men, with attitude'.

We can see at once the appeal of these films, especially, though not exclusively, to black audiences. In the ways their heroes deal with whites, there is a remarkable absence, indeed a conscious reversal of, the old deference or childlike dependency. In many ways, these are 'revenge' films — audiences relishing the black heroes' triumphs over 'Whitey', loving the fact that they're getting away with it! What we may call the moral playing-field is levelled. Blacks are neither always worse nor always better than whites. They come in the usual human shapes - good, bad and indifferent. They are no different from the ordinary (white) average American in their tastes, styles, behaviour, morals, motivations. In class terms, they can be as 'cool', affluent and well groomed as their white counterparts. And their 'locations' are the familiar real-life settings of ghetto, street, police station and drug-bust.

At a more complex level, they placed blacks for the first time at the centre of the popular cinematic genres - crime and action films - and thus made them essential to what we may call the 'mythic' life and culture of the American cinema - more important, perhaps, in the end, than their 'realism'. For this is where the collective fantasies of popular life are worked out, and the exclusion of blacks from its confines made them precisely, peculiar, different, placed them 'outside the picture'. It deprived them of the celebrity status, heroic charisma, the glamour and pleasure of identification accorded to the white heroes offilm noir, the old private eye, crime and police thrillers, the 'romances' of urban low-life and the ghetto. With these films, blacks had arrived in the cultural mainstream - with a vengeance!

These films carried through one counter-strategy with considerable single-mindedness - reversing the evaluation of popular stereotypes. And they proved that this strategy could secure box-office success and audience identification. Black audiences loved them because they cast black actors in glamorous and 'heroic' as well as 'bad' roles; white audiences took to them
because they contained all the elements of the popular cinematic genres. Nevertheless, among some critics, the judgement on their success as a representational counter-strategy has become more mixed. They have come to be seen by many as 'blaxploitation' films.

ACTIVITY

Can you hazard a guess as to why they have come to be seen in this way?

To reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it. Escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme (blacks are poor, childish, subservient, always shown as servants, everlastingly 'good', in menial positions, deferential to whites, never the heroes, cut out of the glamour, the pleasure, and the rewards, sexual and financial) may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical 'other' (blacks are motivated by money, love bossing white people around, perpetrate violence and crime as effectively as the next person, are 'bad', walk off with the goodies, indulge in drugs, crime and promiscuous sex, come on like 'Superspades' and *always get away with it*!). This may be an advance on the former list, and is certainly a welcome change. But it has not escaped the contradictions of the binary structure of racial stereotyping and it has not unlocked what Mercer and Julien call 'the complex dialectics of power and subordination' through which 'black male identities have been historically and culturally constructed' (1994, p. 137). The black critic, Lerone Bennett acknowledged that 'after it *Sweet Sweetback ...* we can never again see black people in films (noble, suffering, losing) in the same way ...' But he also thought it 'neither revolutionary nor black', indeed, a revival of certain 'antiquated white stereotypes', even 'mischievous and reactionary'. As he remarked, 'nobody ever fucked his way to freedom' (quoted in Cripps, 1978, p. 248). This is a critique which has, in retrospect, been delivered about the whole foregrounding of black masculinity during the Civil Rights movement, of which these films were undoubtedly a by-product. Black feminist critics have pointed out how the black resistance to white patriarchal power during the 1960s was often accompanied by the adoption of an exaggerated 'black male macho' style and sexual aggressiveness by black leaders towards black women (Michele Wallace, 1979; Angela Davis, 1983; bell hooks, 1992).

5.2 Positive and negative images

The second strategy for contesting the racialized regime of representation is the attempt to substitute a range of 'positive' images of black people, black life and culture for the 'negative' imagery which continues to dominate popular representation. This approach has the advantage of righting the balance. It is underpinned by an acceptance - indeed, a celebration - of difference. It inverts the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term, sometimes reading the negative positively: 'Black is Beautiful'. It tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected. It greatly expands the range of racial representations and the complexity of what it
means to 'be black', thus challenging the reductionism of earlier stereotypes. Much of the work of contemporary black artists and visual practitioners fall into this category. In the photographs specially taken to illustrate David Bailey's critique of positive images in 'Rethinking black representation' (1988), we see black men looking after children and black women politically organizing in public - giving the conventional meaning of these images a different inflection.

Underlying this approach is an acknowledgement and celebration of diversity and difference in the world. Another kind of example is the 'United Colours of Benetton' advertising series, which uses ethnic models, especially children, from many cultures and celebrates images of racial and ethnic hybridity. But here, again, critical reception has been mixed (Bailey, 1988). Do these images evade the difficult questions, dissolving the harsh realities of racism into a liberal mish-mash of 'difference'? Do these images appropriate 'difference' into a spectacle in order to sell a product? Or are they genuinely a political statement about the necessity for everyone to accept and 'live with' difference,
in an increasingly diverse, culturally pluralist world? Sonali Fernando (1992) suggests that this imagery 'cuts both ways: on the one hand suggesting a problematizing of racial identity as a complex dialectic of similarities as well as differences, but on the other ... homogenizing all non-white cultures as other.'

The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which 'being black' is represented, but does not necessarily displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. The strategy challenges the binaries - but it does not undermine them. The peace-loving, child-caring Rastafarian can still appear, in the following day's newspaper, as an exotic and violent black stereotype ...

5.3 Through the Eye of Representation

The third counter-strategy locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within. It is more concerned with the forms of racial representation than with introducing a new content. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories.

Thus, instead of avoiding the black body, because it has been so caught up in the complexities of power and subordination within representation, this strategy positively takes the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves. Instead of avoiding the dangerous terrain opened up by the interweaving of 'race', gender and sexuality, it deliberately contests the dominant gendered and sexual definitions of racial difference by working on black sexuality. Since black people have so often been fixed, stereotypically, by the racialized gaze, it may have been tempting to refuse the complex emotions associated with 'looking'. However, this strategy makes elaborate play with 'looking', hoping by its very attention, to 'make it strange' - that is, to de-familiarize it, and so make explicit what is often hidden - its erotic dimensions (Figure 4.29). It is not afraid to deploy humour - for
example, the comedian, Lenny Henry, forces us by the witty exaggerations of his Afro-Caribbean caricatures, to laugh with rather than at his characters. Finally, instead of refusing the displaced power and danger of 'fetishism', this strategy attempts to use the desires and ambivalences which tropes of fetishism inevitably awaken.