



## Art as a Dialogue in Social Space by Kobena Mercer

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My initial reaction was doubtful: what on earth could Black British experiences bring to the question of Nordic colonialism? Sweden's Ministry of Culture has declared 2006 to be the Year of Multiculturalism and while such an official initiative is undoubtedly well-intentioned, the very language in which the state expresses its desire to "integrate" the new migrants who have entered Scandinavian society as a result of globalisation is all too predictable as a managerial response to the fear of a xenophobic backlash on the part of extremist elements within the native population. Brushing against the grain of the liberal humanist internationalism with which many of the Scandinavian countries are associated, the decision to feature 49 exclusively Swedish artists in *The Moderna Exhibition 2006* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm was a somewhat incongruous gesture. On the one hand, where Romanian-born artist Dorinel Marc gave his place in the exhibition to Markus Anderson, a Swedish painter whose portrait subjects include Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and Mijailo Mijailovic (Anna Lindh's assassin), one might say that the *un*internationalism built into Moderna's curatorial platform subverted the official discourse of "integration," such that the cultural production of neo-Nazi "minorities" was put forward as equivalent to the artistic production of any of the "ethnic minorities" living in Sweden today.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, where globalisation has gradually become a societal norm over the past fifteen years, perhaps Moderna's rather desperate search for something "subversive" reveals an ideological deadlock between two varieties of official internationalism, namely that of the corporate art-world and that of the welfarist state. Where the latter is primarily concerned not with the needs of new immigrants but with suppressing the potential damage that extremist right-wing elements threaten to inflict upon the self-image of the liberal humanist state, the former has long passed over the *social* contexts from which "difference" and "diversity" have become integral to the circulation of contemporary art by diverting attention to the wished-for "resolution" of such social questions in multiculturalism's magical formula of *market-based inclusion*.

Breaking out of the stalemate between these two faces of official internationalism, *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* offers an alternative by virtue of the historical thrust of its conceptual approach. While the role of Sweden and Denmark in the 15th century expansion of Western European maritime trade is widely acknowledged in studies of colonial history, the focus usually lies on Scandinavia's economic competition with the Dutch and the English (to say nothing of the wars between Denmark and Sweden themselves). Opening the geo-historical field to include Greenland and the Faroe Islands, the shift of focus to examine intra-Nordic territorial struggles not only brings to light Scandinavia's *internal* colonialism, but also situates the historical predicaments of the Sámi as a First Nations people dealing with a colonial legacy *that has not yet been recognised as such*. In contrast to official discourses of "integration," whether pursued by the corporate multiculturalism of the international art market or the social policies of the liberal humanist state, two very different kinds of question immediately arise out of the historically materialist alternative. Why has the specificity of Nordic colonialism been structurally "invisible" in the critical re-examination of modernity initiated by the post-colonial turn? How is this temporal quality of belated recognition to be understood from the perspective of those, such as the Sámi, who are, in fact, historical survivors of such "internal colonialism"?

Reflecting on these matters, I realised that the topic of Nordic colonialism might not be so remote after all. In 1993 the photographer Jorma Puranen exhibited his series *Imaginary Homecoming* (1991-96) at the Photographer's Gallery in London as part of a unique project curated by the British Asian photographer, Sunil Gupta. Produced in collaboration with the Institute for International Visual Arts (INIVA), *Disrupted Borders: An Intervention in Definitions of Boundaries* (1993) was an early and ambitious entry in the critical response to contemporary globalisation, exploring "the cultural challenges offered by 'the others' of western culture: immigrants, women, the so-called underclass, the sexually 'queer' and the disabled." While prefiguring curatorial strategies that were subsequently institutionalised in the international biennale circuit, the critical scope of Gupta's vision is certainly worth revisiting, not least of all because his combined emphasis on aesthetic innovation and activist intervention has become something of a rarity in contemporary curating.

Featured on the front cover, Puranen's work addresses the politics of the colonial archive. Re-photographing images of Sámi individuals "found" in ethnographic archives, the photographer explains that, "Photography and anthropology share a common history. They were both innocent enough to get

abused in colonial processes. With this work I wanted to prompt questions, for example, about how and with whose gaze we look at and photograph the world beyond our own culture.”<sup>2</sup> Describing the genesis of the work - “it was born of long conversations with Sami people (Lapps) about their land and history. The Sami people are now a minority of about 50,000 - 60,000 inhabitants” - Puranen then revealed the dispersed archival condition of his source materials and the enigmatic theme of a “second burial” that implicates his art in a reparative act:

*“Drawn from the picture archives of ethnological and anthropological museums, the oldest pictures were taken by an expedition led by Prince Roland Bonaparte in 1882; I found the collection here in the Musee de L’Homme in Paris. While researching archive materials of the Sami peoples’ life and culture I found portraits of mothers, fathers, grandmothers and other relatives of Sami families that I knew personally.”*

By printing such archival images onto Plexiglass and then re-photographing them on the Arctic slopes of northern Norway and Sweden, the artist stated that, “the idea was to metaphorically return people who had been buried in archives back to the landscape from which they had been separated.”<sup>3</sup> Among the many works produced in this way, what I found most moving were those in which the intense tonal contrast created by the sunlight casts ghostly shadows from the Plexiglass onto the snow-covered ground – and indeed such chiaroscuro lighting conditions are heightened in a single work that features a circle of Plexiglass images nocturnally illuminated by a single naked light bulb.

Having since described *Imaginary Homecoming* as, “an attempt to create a living context in which the people shown in the images, and perhaps their fates, can be redressed,”<sup>4</sup> there are three aspects of Puranen’s practice that warrant our further attention. First, by virtue of re-photographing “found” materials, the photographer questions notions of originality and authenticity in respect to issues of authorship, although instead of a merely formalist deployment of “appropriation,” it is significant that Puranen’s authorial voice grounds itself in a dialogic relation with Sámi interlocutors. While a reception study of Puranen’s photographs, among Sámi audiences and among Scandinavian audiences as a whole, would be extremely valuable, what is important to observe is the way in which his handling of the politics of representation displaces the juridical framework of identity politics – who has the right to speak? who has the right to represent “others”? – into a dialogical “circle” whereby photographer and viewer alike are placed in a condition of answerability, which opens issues of enunciation to the broader question of public discourse – who is speaking? who is being spoken to?

Secondly, where we find that Puranen's artistic interest in the Nordic landscape tradition has led him to such materials as antique maps and illustrations of expeditions, the formal method of re-presenting archival materials in *Imaginary Homecoming* is fully consistent with a later series in which 16th and 17th century Scandinavian portrait paintings are taken out of the museum's interior and photographed in exterior light. Regarding this latter series, *Shadows, Reflections and all that sort of thing...* (1999-2001), Puranen has said, "I photographed disturbing reflections on the surface of paintings – these reflections arouse in the viewer some kind of feeling of vulnerability, which is created by the tensions between the moment and permanence, between a flash of light and patina that is centuries old."<sup>5</sup> In my view, it is precisely this quality of "vulnerability" that *Imaginary Homecoming* introduces to our reflections on postcolonial histories, for what the contemporary viewer experiences and witnesses in the gap between the archival image of Sámi ancestors who were first "buried" in the Musée de L'Homme, and the second "burial" that takes place in the Nordic landscape, is both the universally human necessity of mourning and the epistemological dilemma of redressing a violent past that has not yet passed into the codes of cultural representation and which, therefore, remains "unrecognised," "invisible," and hence "unknown" as such.

Re-entering the archive has been a key strand of postcolonial consciousness among artists of the black diaspora, and while such well-known works as Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1990) addressed the specific circumstances of American slavery, one of the key themes to emerge across installation, photography and film is the impossibility of "knowing" the colonial past as if it were merely another positivist "fact." Whereas all empires encircle cross-cultural contact with extreme disparities of political power and economic agency, the modern Western imperialism of the 19th century was distinguished by the way in which a rationalist calculus of profit and loss was applied to all aspects of human life and then covered over by systems of representation that sought to depict the West as embodying "universal" knowledge of humankind – in the collections of artefacts housed in its ethnographic museums and in the ghostly witnesses that now look back at us from its archival photographs. Hence, the third aspect of Puranen's practice is one that connects with a critically historicist sensibility in the post-colonial outlook. Understanding that colonial history is irretrievably "lost" as an object of knowledge that cannot be reconstituted as a monologic chronology of events, it is also understood today that the subjective corollary to the radically non-monumental condition of the colonial archive is the psychoanalytical politics of *post-colonial trauma*.

Black British artists of the early 1980s such as Keith Piper and Donald Rodney were among the first to launch a fresh mode of enquiry into the past that began from the premise that the very writing of history is a political act. However, in marked contrast to the “romanticisation” of the diaspora’s unknown ancestors – which could be described as a core feature of the modernist critique of Eurocentrism found in the discourse of black cultural nationalism in earlier moments in the 20th century such as the “New Negro” movement of the 1920s, the Negritude movement of the 1940s, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s – what differentiated the post-modernist epistemology of the post-colonial approach was an awareness of representation as a constitutive element in the social production of knowledge. Rather than a mechanical “application” of theory to practice, the intuitive modes of knowledge being explored by British artists from Caribbean, South Asian and African backgrounds during the 1980s – in which archive photographs of “first generation immigrants” featured prominently – was given critical impetus by the post-structuralist methods being employed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), whose account of the literary “construction” of the Islamic world in European novels of the 19th century resonated with Stuart Hall’s contribution to *Race and Class in Post-colonial Society* (1978), which offered an account of the formative role of “cultural difference” in the construction of Caribbean identities. Just as Hall’s media critiques of the period unpacked the symbolic economy of stereotypes – an area of investigation radicalised by Homi Bhabha’s “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse” (1983) – so Sander Gilman’s investigation of Sartje Bartmann, (the so-called “Hottentot Venus” who was exhibited in 1820s Paris as a living specimen of “otherness” and whose bodily remains were also interred in Musee de L’Homme), laid bare the link between trauma and archive as a core feature of colonial history in *Difference and Pathology* (1985). Where the post-colonial turn initiated an epistemological and artistic breakthrough – which took the dismantling of binary oppositions in thinking about identities as its initial deconstructive aim – it paved the way for the rediscovery of Frantz Fanon’s insights into the psychoanalytical spaces of “internal colonialism” that are bequeathed to contemporary subjectivities by all that remains unsaid and repressed in the post-colonial unconscious.<sup>6</sup>

Writing on Keith Piper’s iconographic handling of the black male body, it struck me that, “the cruciform portrayal of the body, which evokes the resurrection promised by Christianity, can be read not simply as conveying art’s redemptive potential in bringing the past back to light, so much as a diasporic reinscription into the realm of the visual arts of the African tradition of the second burial, which

imparts a sense of closure to the work of mourning that accompanies the first, and thus ritually marks out the moment when the mourners can begin again.”<sup>7</sup> Having explored the psychic terrain of history in *A Ship Called Jesus* (1991), by looking at how diaspora traditions of the Black Protestant Church turned the colonising agency of missionary Christianity against itself, Piper’s work gave me the chance to reflect on the reparative potential of art in light of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation initiative (and I was fortunate enough to attend a Soweto meeting of the TRC when I visited Johannesburg in 1996). Whereas such a public politics of testimony “show[ed] a nation grappling with its histories and memories in a struggle to reconstruct itself and seize the chance to begin again,” it struck me that:

*“This is something that has never happened in post-Empire Britain or the post-Civil Rights United States, where the inability to reconcile with the traumas and tragedies of slavery and colonialism are manifest in the permanent crisis around social relations of ‘race.’ The violence keeps coming back, and ‘the traditions of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living,’ as Marx once said, simply because the past cannot pass into representation – its passage is blocked by forgetting and denial. In contrast to South Africa’s open acknowledgement of its need to come to terms with the past, in the West this ethical task seems to fall out of the political realm into the marginal world of art. Moreover, as Sander Gilman observes in the case of Germany after 1945 and after reunification in 1989, the aesthetic retreat into formalism was also an attempt to flee from the pain of the past, and he concludes that, ‘Art can be a space where memories of trauma are articulated – or it can be the site of their most radical repression.’”<sup>8</sup>*

While the issue of “reparations” in African American politics stumbles on the rock-face of an impossible calculus – like the politics of “apology” in First Nations contexts such as Aboriginal Australia and Native North America – the psychoanalytical concept of a drive-to-reparation as a constructive response to pain, guilt and suffering transforms the question of responsibility away from the rivalrous claims of victim and perpetrator, so often locked into mutual antagonism, and towards a dialogical understanding of the way trauma violates the very boundaries of contractual Cartesian subjectivity. Without for a moment suggesting that art can be a substitute for politics, we may nonetheless register the important distinction that Fanonian scholar Françoise Vergès makes between two forms of psychological repression at work in the colonised psyche. When the past is subject to *conservative* repression “the world is then like a grave, inhabited by ghosts



whose presence haunts the living.” Alternatively, instead of denying the unspeakable “truth” of slavery for fear of reawakening the nightmare of the past, or “romanticising” black history in heroic narratives of constant resistance – a duality encircling the epistemic force-field that Toni Morrison fearlessly broke through with her epic novel *Beloved* (1988) – art may assist in the process of *constitutive* repression in which, “opening the grave, freeing the ghosts, would be a start in the process of anamnesis [the work of thought].”<sup>9</sup>

Researching Scandinavian materials in a French anthropological museum, Jorma Puranen encountered ghostly fragments of Sámi ancestry in a diaspora-like condition of exile and dispersal. However, rather than equate diaspora and indigenous experiences of colonialism, the “vulnerability” that his photographs induce – like archive materials in the works of Black Audio Film Collective – touches our thoughts and feelings with precisely the liberating quality of anamnesis whereby the ghosts of the painful past can be freed from the condition of “not knowing” that surrounds them in the colonial archive. Turning to John Akomfrah’s film *Testament* (1988), I want to pursue another angle on the politics of post-colonial memory by considering an autobiographical dimension to my initial reaction to the challenge of rethinking Nordic colonialism. Growing up in a mixed-race family in Ghana and England in the 1960s and 1970s, I certainly recall children from Swedish and Danish families, as well as from Dutch, German, Canadian and American families, who attended Takoradi International School, which is where I completed my primary education. In terms of “race” and class, the social location our family occupied was one in which the “international” expatriate class intersected with the “national” middle classes of a former colony gripped by the contradictions of post-independence politics in a neo-colonial world economy. In point of fact, there is an even closer connection: when our family left Ghana after the 1966 military coup that overthrew the government of Kwame Nkrumah, my parents were indebted to their close friendship with the Taylors, a mixed-race Swedish/Ghanaian family, who helped us to find housing in London before their departure for Stockholm. Thinking about the many layers of connection and contingency whereby aspects of “Nordic colonialism” have been *always already inscribed* within my own biographical formation, as it were, it struck me that such memory “traces” could be examined in Walter Benjamin’s terms.

Rejecting history as a positivist science of ultimate truths (even in the Marxist discourse of dialectical materialism), Benjamin explored the question of memory as it survives the shock-effects of traumatic modernity. Where his *Arcades*

*Project* sought to map out a montage-based methodology for a different kind of dialectical historiography, in which the dream-like phantasia of commodity forms would be opened to investigation in a moment of critical awakening, he wrote, “There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of *what has been*: its advancement has the structure of awakening.”<sup>10</sup> Relatedly, in his insightful contrast between Proust and Benjamin, writer Peter Szondi comments on *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, that, “Unlike Proust, Benjamin does not want to free himself from temporality; he does not wish to see things in their ahistorical essence. He strives instead for historical experiences and knowledge. Nevertheless, he is sent back into the past, *a past, however, which is open, not completed, and which promises the future.*”<sup>11</sup>

Such a conception of historical time as an always already incomplete text of individual memory and experience is, for me, the only viable option for approaching the question of post-colonial temporality, with its symptomatic qualities of belatedness and deferral. It was this Benjaminian approach to the dilemmas of bringing post-colonial history into the field of representation that was the driving force behind Black Audio Film Collective’s distinctive handling of the montage principle. Widely known for their highly acclaimed feature-length documentary, *Handsworth Songs* (1985), their first work was a tape-slide installation, *Signs of Empire* (1984), which carved out a critical space of poetic reflection by producing a series of startling juxtapositions between fragments of television reportage depicting 1980s Britain torn apart by “rioting” and photographic images of monumental public statues commemorating the “victories” of the British Empire. Rather than stage a confrontation between past and present, as if each entity were fully transparent, Black Audio rejected naturalism and realism in favour of avant-garde experimentation precisely because of their critical understanding of the gaps, absences, distortions and fabrications that arise in the archive, whether this is the public record legitimated by officialdom or the private memories contained in albums of family photographs. Foregrounding such an irreconcilable agonism among the materials of historical knowledge, Black Audio’s montage-principle creates a mood of critical reverie that allows the viewer to engage with the emotions of lived experiences of migration, displacement and trauma without falling into the pitfalls of pathos or protest that circumscribe realist or naturalistic attempts to “represent” traumatic historical experiences such as slavery or colonialism that are, by definition, unrepresentable.



Visiting Ghana as an adult in the 1990s I often found myself in the role of a tourist, even though the forts and castles that I travelled to on the coastline were already very familiar to me from school trips and Sunday afternoon excursions when there was not much else to do at home. Although such forts and castles can be found elsewhere across West Africa, the historian Albert van Dantzig points out that a disproportionate number of such structures exist in Ghana. Placed within the overall historiography of European interactions on the Ghana coast – which began with the Portuguese (1400-1600), who were followed by the Dutch and the English (1600-1640), followed by periods of competition, which introduced the Danes and the Swedes, and periods of co-existence among rival maritime trading companies (1640-1710 and 1710-1800) – he writes:

*“Within three centuries more than sixty castles, forts and lodges were built along a stretch of coast less than 300 miles (500 km) long. Many of these buildings are still in existence in the present, and if some of them could be regarded as important individual monuments, the whole chain of buildings, whether intact, ruined or merely known as sites, could be seen as a collective historical monument unique in the world: the ancient “shopping street” of West Africa.”<sup>2</sup>*

While the “shopping street” metaphor could be taken to dramatically re-frame the aims of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* within a global perspective on the history of modernity, the “facts” produced in this account of the architectural archaeology of the Atlantic slave trade encouraged me to think of the enigmatic visuality of Ghana’s forts and castles as structural outcroppings of a radically *anti-monumentalist* legacy.

Describing how castles built at Elmina, Cape Coast and Accra were each headquarters of successive European powers, van Dantzig’s narrative allows one to approach Ghanaian history as a palimpsest of past and present layers. Christiansborg Castle, so-named by the Danes, became the seat of government under the English in 1876 and remains so to this day, while Cape Coast castle is now a museum (whose collection of artefacts was re-installed with the assistance of the Smithsonian Museum during the 1990s). Elmina Castle, on the other hand, has always exerted a special fascination for me and I wonder whether this is because of the way that its deep historical significance is paradoxically revealed and made visible by virtue of the spatial *emptiness* that surrounds the entire structure like a ghost. Built in the 15th century era of the Portuguese maritime Baroque as a way-station in the mythic European quest for Prester John – who was believed to govern a Christian kingdom in Central Africa – the discovery of a

nearby gold mine precipitated the 16th century adaptation of Elmina Castle into a trading station for the equally lucrative trade in slaves. In other words, this architectural structure occupies a *material site of historical trauma that resists the process of monumentalisation*. And this thought only recently became clear to me through repeated viewings of *Testament*, Black Audio's feature-length fiction film about a television reporter who returns to Ghana for the first time in twenty years after having been exiled in Britain since the 1966 coup.

On the face of it, Abena has arrived in Ghana to film a report on Werner Herzog, who is filming *Cobra Verde* (1989) on location. However, as the diegesis gets underway, and Abena visits friends who were also fellow activists trained at the Nkrumah Ideological Institute at Winneba, *Testament* reveals a woman struggling to come to terms with her repressed grief. She encounters a wall of silence as former friends refuse to speak to her because during the coup she was forced to betray them. As the montage of rhythmic alternations between diegetic and archival segments propels her into a "war zone of memories" (the film's subtitle), it becomes clear that this is an intervention in art cinema – Akomfrah has cited as key influences Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Ritwik Gatak and "English Brechtian cinema of the 1970s" – that steps away from the *Bildungsroman* template of narrative realism so as to explore universally human dilemmas of memory and mourning among survivors of post-colonial trauma.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, director John Akomfrah carves out a grounded practice of intertextuality that channels the viewer's thoughts and feelings away from the stasis of rage or resentment which is held intact by heroic narratives of black resistance – one thinks of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1974) as a naturalistic effort at narrating the story of enslavement – and delivers the viewer instead into a space of poetic reflection in which the irreconcilable gaps between public history and private memory can be made available for reflection.

Where *Cobra Verde* was based on Bruce Chatwin's novel about a Latin American slave trader in Dahomey, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), we find that *Testament* is structured by a countervailing set of intertextual allusions that take numerous works from Central European sources as their point of departure. The sound design incorporates extracts from Arvo Part's *Fratres and Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* and Kyrstof Pendereki's *Magnificat*, whose threnodic beauty "cradles" Abena's traumatised psyche as we see her depicted in Akan funeral attire on the prow of a boat on the Volta River. Employing colour filters derived from traditional Ga colours of mourning, archival segments are tinted along the lines of the post-realist "colour temperature" that informs Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*

(1983). Above all, Abena can be seen as a post-colonial counterpart to the protagonist of *Man of Marble* (1977) by Polish director Andrzej Wajda – but where Agnieszka is a film student who uncovers archival material of a 1950s propaganda-hero and is pressured by the state to revise her account, Abena announces that her attempts to interview Herzog for her television programme have broken down. As she makes this announcement on the steps of Elmina Castle, we see Akomfrah directing Abena’s television crew in a scene highly reminiscent of the coastal setting of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mepris* (1966). Far from being a merely virtuoso performance in post-modern self-reflexivity, *Testament’s* intertextual structure embeds a critical awareness of how deeply colonial history resists representation on account of memories that cannot pass into the field of vision because they have been blocked by undigested trauma. As the camera soars above Elmina Castle’s baroque architecture, a sensation of sheer weightlessness creates a contrapuntal difference from the unbearably painful *gravitas* of this material site, which marks one of the points of involuntary separation whereby the Atlantic slave trade inaugurated the modern African diaspora.

Imagine my surprise, then, when sitting on a beach in Greece a few years ago I found that I could not actually read the book I held in my hands because of the tears that came in recognition of what the author described. Aminatta Forna’s testimonial narrative – *The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter’s Memoir* (2002) – not only reveals the impossibility of a linear approach to narrative when life experience has been blasted out of the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* by the realities of post-colonial trauma, but also shows how the reparative drive to remember and piece back together the broken shards of individual memory is a powerful impetus for the artistic drive itself.<sup>14</sup>

A brute summary of Forna’s text would tell you that she was the daughter of a mixed-race Scottish/Sierra Leonean family whose father led the principal opposition party after independence and who was summarily arrested and sentenced to death by the military government that seized power in 1974. In the rich and complex structures of feeling created through Forna’s beautifully sparse prose, what the reader enters into and engages with, however, is the writerly texture of a struggle to come to terms with “memories” that have been buried in the unconscious on account of their unbearable pain. Divided into two “books,” *The Devil that Danced on the Water* begins from the narrative perspective of childhood and is driven by the forward motion of an individual woman moving into adult consciousness. The second half, however, is written in the present

tense and narrates the story of an author who finds that her ability to discover the “truth” of what actually happened to her father on 30th July 1974 is blocked by both the lack of an official or reliable archival record and by the walls of silence she encountered when revisiting Sierra Leone to carry out research. The “cut” or caesura inscribed in the formal construction of Forna’s text thus hovers over the unrepresentable anguish of trauma in much the same way as ancient European maps designated what was geographically “unknown” by depicting monsters and creatures of legend and fable.

More to the point, in a case of post-modern art imitating post-colonial life, we find that where Aminatta Forna is a broadcaster and journalist (who presented items on African art for BBC television in the early 1990s) who returns to West Africa after many years of living in Britain, her testimony re-traces the fictional passage that Abena made in John Akomfrah’s *Testament*, which was filmed in 1987 when the director was merely thirty years of age. To observe this uncanny similarity is not to posit equivalence between cinematic and literary inscriptions of post-colonial trauma, but to underline the necessity of formal experimentation and aesthetic innovation in the search for cultural languages and expressive forms that are capable of bringing the “unspeakable” aspects of the post-colonial condition into the realm of art *for the very first time*.

I conclude on this note because although I was initially struck by the apparent belatedness of the initiative to rethink Nordic colonialism, I have come to realise that the tortured chronology of delayed recognition now being brought to bear on the “internal colonialism” of the Scandinavian region is simply par for the course as far as post-colonial consciousness is concerned. The fact that it is only at the beginning of the 21st century that we are now ready to take a fresh look at what is “not-yet-conscious” about “what has been,” to return to Benjamin’s words, suggests that the political predicament of the Sámi is cut from the same cloth as the stories that Akomfrah, Forna and Piper have produced from the black British locations in which they work as contemporary artists.

The “invisibility” of Nordic colonialism may well be a product of the “westward” orientation towards North America and Western Europe that remains a structural feature of contemporary globalisation – one thinks of the way the Hollywood adaptation of Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa* (1985) assimilated the material to the “Raj nostalgia” cycle popularised by the Merchant Ivory films of the period. Relatedly, for all the anti-Hollywood bluster, the films of the Dogma 95 group that have touched on issues on “race” in the present-day Nordic context – *Festen*

(1998) by writer Thomas Vinterberg, for example – like the *USA Land of Opportunities* trilogy by Lars van Trier, have diverted attention from what is indigenous to Scandinavian race-relations by modelling themselves on American codes that foreground a simplistic “black/white” duality. Viewing contemporary globalisation as a mediated phenomenon, one might say that Swedish colonialism, to take just one example, is very much alive and well in the export-led success story whereby the consumers of the world seem all too happy to have been culturally “colonised” by Abba and Ikea!

In the quarter-century since Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and other writers initiated the post-colonial turn in the arts and humanities, it sometimes seems as though the very “success” of post-colonial theory has also become part of the problem. One of the best ways of avoiding the difficulties of a dialogue in social space is to fast-forward to the premise of a false equivalence which seeks to proclaim that “we are all post-colonials now,” along similar lines to some responses to the challenge of rethinking “whiteness” (in relation to which, as film historian Richard Dyer observed, the task of initiating critical dialogue was often wrong-footed by identitarian forms of thinking).<sup>15</sup> Introducing the post-identitarian scope of their recent *Over Here* (2004) anthology, Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher have argued that:

*“whereas if the exile was the figure of early modernity, the diasporan or immigrant was the figure of post-modernity with its de-centred or deterritorialized subject. With few exceptions, the ‘new cultural politics of difference’ foregrounded marginalized, First World diasporan agents, but quickly segued into the institutional reification and commodification of expressions of ‘cultural hybridity.’”<sup>16</sup>*

While tracking the uneven development of the post-colonial breakthrough, the view that “institutionalisation” is equivalent to “commodification” is one that I would want open up for debate. The black British architect, David Adjaye, who was commissioned to redesign the interior of the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo in 2002, is currently constructing not one or two but three new buildings in London that will provide permanent “homes” for Caribbean, South Asian, and African artists, and indeed all the “other” identities that enrich black Britain’s uniquely cosmopolitan mix. Over the next few years Adjaye Associates will build the Bernie Grant Arts Centre in Tottenham, the Stephen Lawrence Centre in Deptford and Rivington Place in Shoreditch, which will house Autograph (Association of Black Photographers) and INIVA. To say that the black British arts sector is thus being literally “institutionalised” does not mean wholesale legitimisation by the market,

but that the sites of dispute, contestation and argument accompanying what Stuart Hall called “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” have shifted into unprecedented spaces that could not have been foreseen twenty years ago.<sup>17</sup> Ours is now a world where, if Nordic colonialism is an “emergent” discourse, in Raymond Williams’ terms, then the black British arts scene may be perceived by some as an “achieved” state of affairs, and perhaps some would regard the hypervisibility of African American popular culture in today’s global media as a “dominant” cultural formation.

Accepting the multiple and divergent chronologies of globalisation, the most plausible pathway for a future-seeking vision is one that returns to the problem of our shared past along the lines suggested by Walter Benjamin. When I have mentioned my participation in *Re-Thinking Nordic Colonialism* to colleagues, many have responded with surprise that such conditions “still” exist at the dawn of a new century. Once we turn to the alternative mode of understanding Benjamin makes available, we find nothing more than an uncanny echo of the statement he made in the 1930s, namely that: “The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history that gives rise to it is untenable.”<sup>18</sup>

#### Notes

1. See review of *The Moderna Exhibition 2006* by Ronald Jones, *frieze* #99, May 2006, p. 179.
2. Jorma Puranen, “Imaginary Homecoming” in Sunil Gupta (ed.), *Disrupted Borders: An Intervention in Definitions of Boundaries*, London: Rivers Oram, 1993, pp. 93-103, p. 96.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Jorma Puranen, [www.galerieanhava.com](http://www.galerieanhava.com), accessed July 2006.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Large-scale anthologies, such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, offer a synopsis of the field, although I believe that for those new to post-colonial studies it is more valuable to begin with individual texts, including: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1978; Stuart Hall, “Pluralism, Race and Class in Caribbean Society”, in (no editor) *Race and Class in Post-colonial Society*, Paris: UNESCO, 1978; Stuart Hall, “The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in George Bridges and Roslind Brunt (eds.), *Silver Linings*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1982; Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” [1983] in *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994; Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, and Homi Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition,” foreword to reprint of Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), London: Pluto Press, 1986, reprinted in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (eds.), *Remaking History (Discussions in Contemporary Culture #4)*, New York: Dia Foundation, 1988, pp.131-150.
7. Kobena Mercer, “To Unbury the Disremembered Body,” in Malena Kalinovska (ed.), *New Histories*, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996, p. 166.



8. Mercer, *op. cit.*, 163.
9. Francoise Verges, "Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism: Fanon and Freedom," in Alan Read (ed.), *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996, p. 64.
10. Walter Benjamin, "The Arcades of Paris," in *The Arcades Project* (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 883.
11. Peter Szondi, "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin" (1961) in Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (trans. Howard Eiland), London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 18.
12. Albert van Dantzig, *Forts and Castles of Ghana*, Accra: Sedco Publishing, 1980, p. vii.
13. John Akomfrah cited in Thomas Allen Harris, "Searching the Diaspora: An Interview with John Akomfrah," in *Afterimage*, April 1992, 10-13, p. 11.
14. Aminatta Forna, *The Devil That Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Memoir of Her Father, her Family, her Country and a Continent*, London: Harper Collins/Flamingo, 2002.
15. Initially made in his article, "White," in *Screen V29 n4* ("The Last Special Issue on Race?"), Richard Dyer elaborates further in *White*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.
16. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (eds.), *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, Boston and New York: MIT/New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004, p. 3.
17. See, Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Black Film/British Cinema*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA Documents #7), 1988, reprinted in David Morely and Kuan Hsing-Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
18. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," (1928) cited in Szondi, 2006, *op. cit.* p. 28.