Afro-Kitsch

Manthia Diawara

The title for this essay comes from Donald John Cosentino, who wrote an article on Afro-kitsch, applying it to African art.¹ I am using it in respect to African-American art and, specifically, in respect to the discourses of Afro-centricity and the kind of work I do myself—literary theory and film theory.

The word kitsch is often applied to objects that mark signs of indeterminacy: “Is it art or is it kitsch?” Kitsch connotes the banal, the inauthentic, the cheap imitation. Kitsch art is often accused of cutting loose old forms from their social networks and redeploying them in utterly new contexts. In addition, kitsch art functions to reinforce identification and to promote consumption of the object thus put forth; it requires an unmediated emotional response. Finally, kitsch art is said to be a murderer of authentic art.

This definition seems untenable today—we are well aware of the post-structuralist celebration of difference, hybridity, creolization, and the carnivalesque. Questions of textuality are no longer so simple. In fact, the definition of kitsch art, which I have adopted here from Herman Bloch, seems conservative today. It positions the high and rarefied over the low and popular. But I want to retain kitsch, nonetheless, in order to address such related matters as national style, mass conversion, and nostalgia. I am concerned that forums such as these have become sites of temporary feel-good, spaces for mass conversions that cover our wounds without healing them, or redeeming us. Revolutionary traditions are invoked only to be co-opted in these cathartic moments. And generic Pan-African symbols increasingly seem the preferred style for that mode of uplifting.

Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing is a good example of the ambivalent
situation for which kitsch art is known. In 1989, the year *Do the Right Thing* was made, there was a ban on realism. Hollywood produced mostly sequels and remakes. We had one more *Indiana Jones, Star Trek,* and *Superman.* And amid this nostalgia for old glory, the attempt to recover what America "used to be," *Do the Right Thing* seemed authentic. After all, the Reagan–Bush administration was returning us to glorious America, and this was not so glorious for black people.

But by what means do we measure *Do the Right Thing's* authenticity? Wahneema Lubiano reminds us that the authenticity of the representation of the black community in films such as *Do the Right Thing* depends more on films by other black directors than on some essentialist notion of the black community. *Do the Right Thing* produced mass identification in at least three directions (and this is why it is kitsch): black neonationalists saw it as an emblem of their call; whites identified negatively in the form of their denial; and feminists recreated a martyrdom in its discourse. Is it art or is it kitsch?

As if that was not enough, John Sayles created his version of *Do the Right Thing* in *City of Hope.* And there we have it—repetitions, sequels, imitations. Certainly, if Spike Lee can speak for black people, John Sayles can speak for white and black liberals. Is it art or is it kitsch? Art or racism?

I turn now to James Brown to further address the murkiness of kitsch art. I am concerned here with the new in kitsch. In other words, can kitsch make new? And can a new discourse be cutting-edge, grounded in the material conditions of a people, combining politics and culture in order to liberate us? I am going to give the authentic me at this point.

In 1965, Radio Mali advertised a concert by Junior Wells and his All-Star Band at the Omnisport in Bamako. The ads promised that the Chicago group would electrify the audience with tunes from such stars as Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and James Brown. I was very excited because I had records by Junior Walker, and to me, at that time, with my limited English, Junior Wells and Junior Walker were one and the same. (That still happens to me, by the way.) It was a little disappointing that we could not have James Brown in person. I had heard that Anglophone countries such as Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria were luckier. They could see James Brown on television, and they even had concerts with Tyrone Davis, Aretha Franklin, and Wilson Pickett.

Sure enough, the concert was electrifying. Junior Wells and his All-Star Band played "My Girl," "I've Been Loving You Too Long," "It's a Man's World," "There Was a Time," "I Can't Stand Myself," "Papa's Got a Brand-New Bag," "Respect," "Midnight Hour," and, of course, "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." During the break, some of us were allowed to talk
with the musicians and to ask for autographs. Our translator was a white
guy from the United States Information Agency. I remember distinguishing
myself by going past the translator and asking one of the musicians the fol-
lowing question: “What is your name?” His eyes lit up, and he told me his
name and asked for mine. I said, “My name is Manthia, but my friends call
me J. B.” He said something about James Brown, and I said something else.
By that time, everybody else was quiet, watching us. I had only two years of
junior-high-school English and the three-month summer vacations I had
spent in Liberia to assist me. I got the nickname J. B. from my James Brown
records.

The next day the news traveled all over Bamako that I spoke English
like an American. This was tremendous in a Francophone country where
one acquired subjection through recourse to francité (thinking through
French grammar and logic). Our master thinker was Jean-Paul Sartre. We
were also living in awe, a form of silence, thinking that to be Francophone
subjects, we had to master francité like Léopold Sédar Senghor, who spoke
French better than French people. Considered as one who spoke English like
Americans and who had a fluent conversation with star musicians, I was ac-
quiring a new type of subjection that put me perhaps above my comrades,
who knew by heart their Les Chemins de la liberté by Sartre. I was on the cut-
ing edge—the front line of the revolution.

For me, then, and for many of my friends, to be liberated was to be ex-
posed to more R&B songs and to be au courant of the latest exploits of
Muhammad Ali, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and Martin
Luther King Jr. These were becoming an alternative cultural capital for the
African youth—impacting to us new structures of feeling and enabling us to
subvert the hegemony of francité after independence.

I want to use this personal anecdote to make a few comments about
the discourse of blackness and of Afrocentricty, which I call the “kitsch of
blackness”—hence, Afro-kitsch. I have placed the music of James Brown
and others at the cutting edge to make some remarks about the academic
front line.

Words and phrases such as revolution, subversion, and transformation of
society are no longer permitted in Marxist theory, feminist theory, or decon-
struction. (I name these only because I work inside of them.) In my opinion,
feminism lost the cutting edge when it turned its back on the subversion of
patriarchal systems and concentrated instead on the empowerment of a few
women. One can appropriately label the present state of feminism as “essen-
tialist,” because it no longer looks for the social constructions that oppress
women. It has become a grand narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an
end. Marxism, too, lost the cutting edge when its best theorists abandoned the revolution and was co-opted by structuralist analyses of hegemonic texts. Finally, deconstruction reached a dead end when it ran out of texts to deconstruct and became a theory about difference with a capital “D.” As Stuart Hall said, some differences might not make any difference at all.

One might say that James Brown lost the cutting edge when he was co-opted by disco music in the seventies. We had to look to George Clinton and the Parliament Funkadelic to determine whether or not James Brown had eluded co-optation. Deconstructivists, feminists, and Marxists no longer have texts with which to theorize their subversive views; they have turned their backs on the material conditions of their discourses. They turn to themselves, cite themselves, and repeat themselves. Meanwhile, like every bourgeoisie, their rank and file keeps growing and their critique of the system grows less and less subversive. It is this intellectual self-fashioning and self-promotion, in the name of a theory that bears the appearance of subversion (and yet only shapes the career of the theorist), that led me to title my essay “Afro-Kitsch.”

Afrocentrists, having learned the rules of the game from feminists, Marxists, and deconstructivists, have turned their backs to texts. By texts, I mean the lived experiences of black people in New York, Detroit, Lagos, and Dakar. Afrocentrists have re-created Egypt, the old African city, but their discourses, unlike James Brown’s music in the sixties, do not serve the homeless in Philadelphia, let alone inspire revolution in South Africa. I submit that until Afrocentricity learns the language of black people in Detroit, Lingala in Zaire, and Bambara in Mali, and grounds itself in the material conditions of the people in question, it is nothing but a kitsch of blackness. It is nothing but an imitation of a discourse of liberation. Afrocentric academics fix blackness by reducing it to Egypt and kente cloths. Hence, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Afrocentrism has become a religion, a camp movement, where one can find refuge from the material realities of being black in Washington, D.C., London, or Nairobi.

By placing James Brown on the cutting edge, and life on the front line, as Eddie Grant would say, I want to bring black cultural practitioners’ attention to the precarious situation of kitsch theory. James Brown always risked the danger of co-optation, and once he was co-opted, he became a kitsch of himself, a cheap imitation. Feminism, deconstruction, and Afrocentricity are at the same impasse that James Brown met. They imitate themselves and refuse to look at new texts of oppression. They elevate intraclass rivalries to the rank of oppression against the homeless and the wretched of the earth. They co-opt oppression for themselves. One should not become as comfort-
able in blackness, or in feminism, as the happy men or women of religion. Blackness and feminism are not a discovery of a truth that lives with one ever after.

Elsewhere, I have defined blackness as a modernist metadiscourse on the condition of black peoples in the West and in areas under Western domination. Blackness is a compelling performance against the logic of slavery and colonialism by those people whose destinies have been inextricably linked to the advancement of the West, and who, therefore, have to learn the expressive techniques of modernity—writing, music, Christianity, industrialization—in order to become uncolonizable. Blackness, in the last instance, is a reflexive discourse, what W. E. B. Du Bois would have called “an afterthought of modernity,” a critical theory on the cutting edge of modernity and modernism, a frontline discourse. Blackness is not removed from the material base of politics and theory. It always seeks to liberate spaces, to subvert orthodoxies, to give voice to the oppressed.

When blackness is conceived as a humanist metadiscourse on the condition of black peoples in the West and in areas under Western domination, it becomes easier to see how people in Africa appropriate its Western modes—Negritude, black consciousness—to sing their right to independence. The formulation of blackness in the West also empowers them with Africanism: African tradition, history, language, and nomenclature. Blackness and Africanism depend on each other, feed on each other, though they are not always interchangeable.

Blackness, as a modernist metadiscourse on the West imbued with revolutionary potential, is always enabling as a model to other repressed discourses such as feminism, gay and lesbian rights, and minority cultures in totalitarian systems. The Chinese students and workers in Tiananmen Square sang “We Shall Overcome”—a black song signaling a challenge to the logic of authoritarianism through Christianity. Blackness itself is challenged in the hands of its postcolonial and postmodern subjects. By focusing on such zones of ambivalence as identity formation, sexual politics, and hybridization, the postmodern subjects of blackness attempt to prevent it from falling into the same essentialist trap as whiteness.

Notes
