

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Alien nation: contemporary art and black Britain

Book Section

How to cite:

Wainwright, Leon (2011). Alien nation: contemporary art and black Britain. In: Brunt, Rosalind and Cere, Rinella eds. Postcolonial Media Culture in Britain. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 27–40.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© Not known

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=280210>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Chapter 3

Alien Nation: Contemporary Black Art in Britain

Leon Wainwright

In this chapter I intend to raise the issue of how to examine critically the art made by black British practitioners – and also to celebrate it. My approach will be to consider notions of ‘art’ and ‘media’ as both interrelated and yet distinct and then to analyse some of the far-reaching implications of this position. The following discussion sets out what I think is at stake here. It aims to make clear why a focus on the art–media nexus should come to be so significant in the arena of contemporary debates in Britain on postcolonialism. It asks: why have certain artists and artworks been identified so closely with the concepts of media and postcolonialism? What have been the consequences for art production and display and for the ideals germane to the liberal arena of art-making? How has the writing of art criticism and the historiography of art changed? How have the changes affected all those artists who reject the status of ‘the derivative and provincial’ in favour of creative authorship and metropolitan or national belonging? Currently, contemporary artists of many different ethnic and creative backgrounds are working on aesthetic and philosophical projects that entail the critical questioning of pre-formulated models of cultural practice. It is therefore important to appreciate why those artists specifically described as ‘black’ or ‘postcolonial’ are finding that current focus on art as media is becoming another aspect of their struggle.

Art as media: displaying ‘Alien Nation’

A touring exhibition that moved between London, Manchester and Norwich during 2006–7 provided an opportunity to think about these questions. ‘Alien Nation’,¹ was an exhibition mounted by the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Institute of International Visual Arts (the ICA and inIVA). It aimed to

show that art and media are simultaneously entwined and separable. The exhibition explored the relationship between the interests of certain artists, grouped together for the purpose of this display, and certain images drawn from films. It included clips of sequences from popular film titles, and the advertising posters that promoted them when they were first released during the 1950s and 1960s in cinemas across the anglophone world. The 'exhibition identity' for the purposes of marketing was an adaptation of the original poster used for the distribution in the USA of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). In the style of a movie billing, it listed the names of its 12 artists and three curators against a blood-orange ground on which an aquatint of two figures, a startled couple dressed in 1950s fashion, are shown fleeing crowds of crazed pursuers.

'Alien Nation' collected examples of film art in order to take a critical stance on the contribution of image-making to the ways in which outsiders, aliens and racial others have been imagined. By tackling the proximity of visual culture to everyday practices of social and cultural alienation, it offered a transparently provocative case for asking about the historical roots of present-day global fear and insecurity. The exhibition drew together diverse strands of the filmic and the 'foreign', the visual and the spectral, including sculpture, photography, painting and multimedia installation. As the exhibition's curators explained, the artists had 'adopted the figure of the extraterrestrial and the alien(ated) landscape in order to comment upon the fantasies, fears and desires that lie, barely suppressed, beneath the surface of contemporary culture and society' (Gill and Tawadros 2006: 11).

To employ a cinematic metaphor, from this perspective the exhibition was like a sudden judder out of the comfy seats from which western subjects have watched ethnic and racial differencing move across the silver screen. It was designed as if to have audiences spilling the fizzy drinks of critical reflection onto the velour cushions of a hegemonically constructed visual culture. The exhibition certainly helped me to think through some of the implications of twentieth-century narratives and pictorial traditions of differencing and the way they have evolved into the twenty-first century.

To understand the circumstances which produced the staging of *Alien Nation* it is helpful to recall recent history and how a wide variety of commentators, artists, archivists, curators, promoters and arts organizers in Britain came to view 'art' and 'media' as occupying identical spheres of attention. The attempt to conflate these two otherwise distinct categories of cultural practice first came about in the 1980s as part of the overall effort to establish and 'make visible' a community of black British artists who had been restricted to the margins of British public memory. The discipline of history of art largely continued to neglect such artists and relegate them to its footnotes. But the adjacent fields of museum and gallery curating and the emerging disciplines of cultural and media studies were beginning to work with models of cultural representation that would break with the dominant mechanistic and official language of 'ethnic minority arts'. Curators and scholars who adopted these models were able to exert particular influence on national organizations such

as the Arts Council of England, as well as local galleries. Meanwhile, many black British artists began to engage with an interpretation of art as media, specifically reflecting on the notion of 'art as text'. This helped them to articulate a rationale for their practices and to affirm their value as the products of complex histories of migration, settlement, exclusion and resistance. As a spate of exhibitions attested, artists, arts organizers, theorists and critics alike energetically grasped the potential of grouping together and defining themselves with a 'black', and subsequently, a 'diaspora' identity.²

The explicit linking of creativity with theories of textuality was strikingly encapsulated in new concepts such as 're-presentation'. Deliberately hyphenated, this notion announced the processual nature of media practices through an analogy to language. As the cultural critic Stuart Hall put it:

Re-presentation is a very different notion from that of reflection. It implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping; not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but more the active labour of *making things mean*. (Hall 1982: 64)

By the end of the 1980s, the approach to visual analysis opened up by models of 're-presentation' was entering the narratives and theoretical explanations proposed for much of what black British artists put on public display. It contributed to their political mobilization as a group by defining their experiences of marginalization and exclusion from the environment of contemporary art at large. It emphasized a style of thinking, combined with a new interest in linguistics, whereby art making and display offered a 'site' for the 'making of meaning'. As Kobena Mercer put it in 1994:

The philosophy of language...provides an analytical vocabulary which can be re-used for 'making sense' of the struggles of the sign inscribed in the artistic text of the black diaspora. (Mercer 1994: 254)

Such textual and linguistic perspectives drawn from cultural and media studies came to predominate in the ways visual phenomena and black/diasporic identities were theoretically examined as well as how they were promoted in galleries and other public art spaces. Embracing the new politics of identity, first- and second-generation African, Asian and Caribbean artists in Britain made the connection with a notion of art as eminently 'readable' and thereby approached their own work in much the same way as a cultural theorist would approach media texts. It was this development which served to encourage a new public awareness of their art as a significant cultural presence – one that was based on experiences of cultural differencing, exclusion and diaspora rooted in a British context. It provided a critical apparatus that became both an organizing principle of black art practice and the preferred grounds on which to organize its patronage, inform its reception and structure its historiography.

It is from this foundational cultural studies perspective that I want now to

30 LEON WAINWRIGHT

look in more detail at the exhibition 'Alien Nation'. The exhibition's choice of artists and works for display showed ample evidence that the emphasis on notions of art-as-media and art as a site of 're-presentation' had been carried over into the twenty-first century. Much of the art included uses of 'found objects': manufactured or mass-distributed items which are combined and adapted in order to construct novel meanings and associations. For example, the memorable works of assemblage or installation by the sculptor Hew Locke serve to 're-present' elements such as mass-produced plastic toys, dolls and animals, artificial flowers, beads and decorations. These become the surface decoration for large objects that resemble bulky flying vessels, a fleet of battleships or spaceships entitled *Golden Horde* (Figure 1), in reference to the Mongol forces that dominated much of Central Asia during the mid-thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. This connotation is lent weight by the assortment of children's toy weapons and the polished plastic armour that provides a shell or carapace for Locke's series of sculptures, suggesting a battalion prepared for victorious attack, armed to the teeth with harmless machine-guns. All glue-gunned into place, the result is a 'making of meaning' from disparate materials, a six-piece fleet of spacecraft manned by luminous reptiles and dirty-faced dolls.

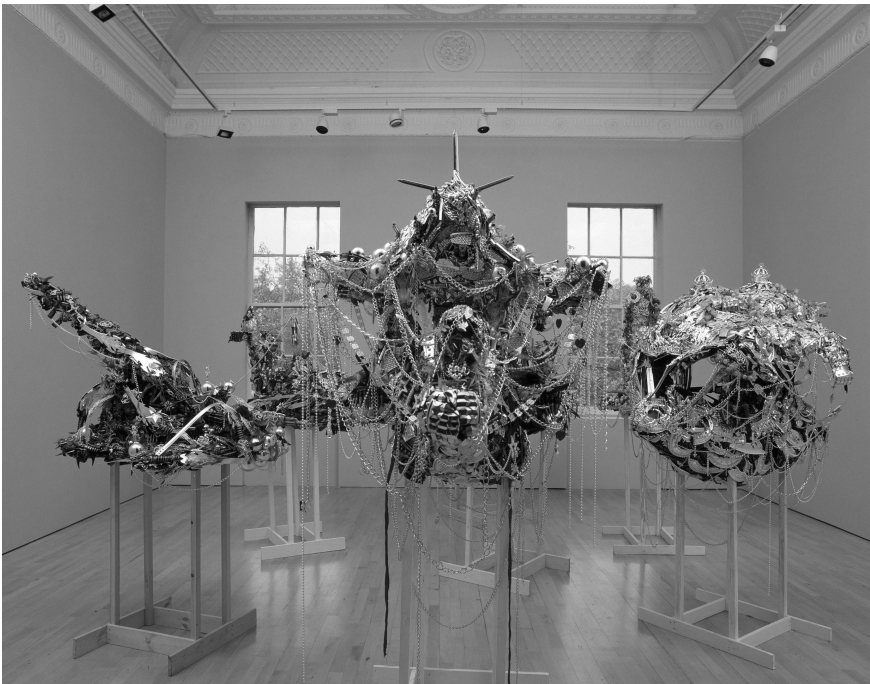


Figure 1 *Golden Horde*, by Hew Locke

Locke grew up in Guyana, South America, and settled in Britain in his late teens where he began a career as an artist. Focusing on sculpture, his works were on a large scale but often in temporary or vulnerable forms. At London's Brunei Gallery, at East International, Norwich, and more prominently at the entrance hall of the Victoria and Albert Museum, he worked with cardboard and black-and-white poster paint to create shapes that were specific to their venues.³ Built on wooden frames that are clearly visible from their basic supports, these sprawled out and appeared to sail across the floors of these various spaces, seeming to push apart columns as they went. By contrast Locke's *Golden Horde* was constructed on narrow upright pedestals, elevated as if to suggest flight, and appearing to hover against the gallery floors and walls. Locke's early work drew attention to a history of transport and travel, and considered the role of ships as facilitating communication across the Atlantic Ocean. The rationale for this focus was explained by exhibition curators who made much of the fact of his upbringing in Guyana, a country deeply implicated in the history of plantation slavery. These ship shapes were emblazoned with the single word 'EXPORT', as if to indicate the human cargo vessels that forcibly transported Africans to the Americas, and also made reference to the production of goods such as sugar, cocoa, tobacco and cotton, carried on the Atlantic for consumption in the European and metropolitan market. Locke's contribution to the 'Alien Nation' exhibition allowed visitors to draw on their knowledge of this earlier work, while also interpreting the hulking cardboard vessels of *Golden Horde* in present-day terms of the high-tech ships sent to protect trade or threaten military invasion and territorial expansion.

The elements of retelling and appropriation and the notion of artworks as readable references to one another that featured in Locke's pieces also appeared in another made-for-the-moment work, a painting entitled *Brown and Proud* by Mario Ybarra Jr. Placed on the gallery wall in first view from the entrance, it looked like a theatrical backdrop. In contrast with the striking technicolour of much of the rest of the exhibition, the work was monochromatic but on the scale of a film hoarding and with a profusion of figures larger than life-sized. Making for a very busy composition, the painting riffed on the general theme of otherworldly visitations and the monster horror figures of science fiction. It included a leering, simian Chewbacca and a female form loosely resembling Princess Leia of *Star Wars*. Ybarra's rendering of the fleshy contents of a push-up bra became a camp allusion to the same galactic bawdiness as Mel Brooks's film spoof *Spaceballs*.

Ybarra's figurative painting was flanked by the more modestly scaled *Merk* by Kori Newkirk (Figure 2), a veil of luminescent glass 'pony' beads tacked against the bare gallery wall. The beads are ingeniously strung on artificial hair extensions to depict a column of bright celestial light, a feature that divides into two to present a suburban road. The houses are pictured at night-time when curtains are drawn and all are asleep. The suggestion is one of various sources of alienation: homeowners cherishing their privacy and property while screening themselves off from contact with their neighbours; the domes-

tic setting as a refuge from public space and the working day; and a reminder that home entertainment such as television has served as a typical site of encounter with science-fiction narratives. This idealized image of orderly and tended buildings, boundary walls, fences and garden plots has also frequently been used to hysterically alarmist ends. It implicitly references the fear of what might be lost through 'swamping' by immigrants or those seeking asylum. This is the ideological background to the image of an uninvited flying saucer which hovers above the rooftops of the 'respectable' neighbourhood. The use of motifs from science-fiction genres was a common thread throughout the exhibition. And in this case the extraterrestrial glow of Newkirk's beads is a presence more threatening than *Star Trek's* Scotty, beaming down among retirement bungalows and their tidy, moonlit lawns.

These works, whether their contexts are those of film, television, photography, painting or sculpture, serve as examples of 're-presentation'. They indicate the appropriation of forms and images from genres of cinema, historical documents or memoirs of slavery now translated into the art gallery and other sites of display. My own visit to the 'Alien Nation' exhibition was in March 2007 when it came to Manchester. It evoked other transpositions of meaning for me and in particular a memory of visiting the cinema at the arts centre, Rich Mix in Shoreditch London earlier that same year. The experience of visit-

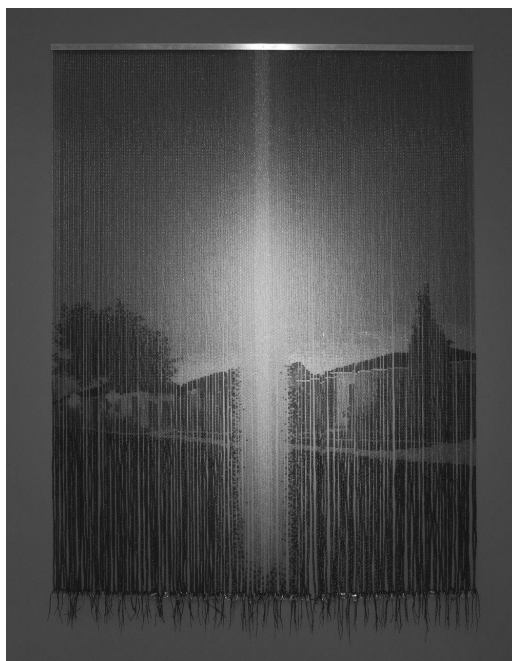


Figure 2 *Merk*, by Kori Newkirk

ing an art gallery has some similarities with cinema-going and Rich Mix happens to be a multi-use space where you can do both activities.

Visiting 'Alien Nation' recalled for me an evening at Rich Mix spent with a friend from Taiwan. We had come to see *Ghosts*, Nick Broomfield's 2006 documentary-styled film drama about an impoverished Chinese mother, smuggled into Britain to work for brutal 'enforcers'. It is inspired by the 18 Chinese cockle-pickers who drowned in the rapidly rising tide at Morecambe Bay in Lancashire in February 2004. In the film, after a series of degrading jobs the heroine is given the fatal final choice of working in a massage parlour or of cockling on the treacherous North Sea coast. When we discussed the film afterwards, my friend broached what was an awkward but important question for her: how did I feel about hearing that Chinese people describe Westerners, indeed, all non-Chinese, as 'ghosts'? She pointed out that the title of Broomfield's film was intended as a tribute to the lives and memory of the victims at Morecambe Bay. It was also an investigation of the possible tragic consequences of being perceived not only as an outsider in Britain, but also as a non-person, without any official status.⁴ But the film also referred to the social significance of the word 'ghost' from a Chinese perspective: a derogatory term for all foreigners, including those who had attempted to colonize and oppress the Chinese.

Even so, in responding to my friend's question I had to admit to feeling not especially harshly caricatured by the 'ghost' label. For me, the term evoked childhood memories of comic films: the jolly and mesmerizing image of Dan Ackroyd's character in *Ghostbusters* for instance, energetically tearing up Manhattan in a jumpsuit to his signature tune, 'If there's something strange/In your neighbourhood/Who you gonna call?'. For me, ghosts were friendly creatures who had been tamed. As Ebenezer Scrooge put it to the Ghost of Jacob Marley in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*,⁵ there was 'more gravy than of grave' for me in the gravity of my friend's searching question. She was responding both intellectually as a university researcher in Taiwan but also from her own life experience to the harsh implications of the dual oppressor-oppressed associations of Broomfield's *Ghosts*. But for myself, from the comfortable context of western privilege and able to recall the hegemonic seductions of ghosts from popular culture, I could make light of her question. In doing so, I was dissociating and distancing myself from the full impact of the disturbing meanings of 'ghost' that the film explored.

As with the effects of popular film, so with mainstream art history and gallery visiting. The comfortable perspective of the spectator who has come only to be entertained is attained by distraction and dissociation from the outsider position. This approach derives from marking out those who are always the 'other' people and not 'us', and hence who become the community's 'aliens'. 'Alien Nation' set out to explore the practices of Othering in popular culture. In this exhibition the historical and geographical roots of these practices are demonstrated to be, after all, not that dissimilar from those that resulted in the Morecambe Bay drownings. For example, some of the repercussions of alienation were explored in the cut-and-mix photography of



Figure 3 *People*, by Henna Nadeem

Henna Nadeem's *People*, made in 2006 (Figure 3), which the exhibition featured prominently.

The artwork focuses purposefully on Britain, presenting and questioning aspects of 'timeless' folk fantasy: in this case, showing English women apparently enjoying one another's company in a picturesque landscape. Lacemakers from northern England are garlanded and meticulously dressed in cotton skirts and pinafores, joining hands around the maypole, or clapping to the tambourine. The way the images are fractured and overlaid on one another is a central motif of Nadeem's art practice. In her essay, 'The Truth is Out There', she writes:

My early experiences as a British Muslim growing up in semi-rural Yorkshire determined the cultural and stylistic motivation of my practice. Nature and landscape formed the backdrop to my childhood, but it was nature viewed through a window rather than experienced directly. Experiencing life indoors and through a window manifested itself in an obsessive collecting of ephemera ... culled from magazines, papers and general stuff bought and found. A marked incongruity about my collection has been the absence of figurative imagery (Islam discourages figurative representation) and my collection reflects that through an emphasis on pattern and landscape. (Nadeem, in Hoffmann 2006: 37).

The artist is ironic about her taste in ornamented surfaces transposed to picturesque outdoor scenes. Her choice of the term 'semi-rural' implies a halfway house for the countryside, an inauthentic status for Yorkshire which disavows its popular description as the quintessential 'heart' of rural England. She goes on to suggest that notions of rural tradition in this country are forever being reified. For her as an artist, tradition is continually to be reinvented through modes of photographic picturing and only ever viewed as if through a window, forever 'framed' and re-presented.

Nadeem's view of the role of photographs in triggering nostalgia and in celebrating the mythic 'timelessness' of the British landscape was elaborated in another exhibition in 2006: 'Henna Nadeem: A Picture Book of Britain'.⁶ Taking a randomly discovered 1966 edition of *Country Life's Picture Book of London*, Nadeem modified its pages with hand-cutting and pasting complemented by digital techniques. The popular *Picture Book* series ran from 1937 to the late 1980s and offers an apparently palliative and reassuring view of a stable Britain in the face of rapid social and cultural change. When Nadeem reframes these already problematic images in her artwork she succeeds in emphasizing the ambivalence and confusion over what should and should not be pictured as British. Benedict Burbridge and David Chandler have written in their prefatory essay to the catalogue for her exhibition: 'In these collages 1960s Britain seems in the grip of parallel realities, not just an unstable, evolving place but one going through a gradual and at times nightmarish metamorphosis' (2006: no pagination). Their response raises the question: just whose 'nightmare' do these photographs signal? For Nadeem, these 'found objects' in the *Picture Books* become the raw material for a delicate pictorial stitching, and an overlay of templates derived from linear principles in Islamic and Moorish traditions. The result is a series of artworks that produce an extraordinary patterning and adopt the tactics of defamiliarization. The resulting continuous images, more kaleidoscopic than fractured, are seen as if through a second lens. A carefully designed pictorial space is created from a harmonious assemblage of photographic surfaces, cut and combined so as to embellish its chosen subject matter. Thus from an ostensibly 'outsider' position Nadeem offers an 'embroidered' reworking of Britishness that challenges the complacency of its hegemonic imagery.

Issues of 'difference' and 'diversity' in diasporic art

In exploring and commenting on the 'outsider' motif, whether by referencing the folkloric or the world of science fiction, 'Alien Nation' served to highlight recent developments in the uses of the terms 'cultural difference', 'national community' and the 'exotic'. These terms have become central to the demands for radical change in the arts first championed by critical commentators and artists who had tired of marginality, racial exclusion and 'invisibility'. But therein lies a true *Tale of the Unexpected* for our times. Those same demands are also becoming part of the very processes whereby techniques of alienation are being reproduced. As the artist, curator and writer Olu Oguibe explains:

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the struggle that non-Western contemporary artists face on the global stage is not Western resistance to difference, as might have been the case in decades past; their most formidable obstacle is Western obsession with an insistence on difference. As some have already pointed out, it is not that any would want to disavow difference, for we are all different one way or another, after all. The point is that this fact of being ought not to constitute the crippling predicament that it does for all who have no definite ancestry in Europe. (Oguibe 2004: xiv–xv)

Oguibe suggests that in the contemporary climate artists are themselves often hurriedly complicit with forms of differencing: a sort of self-objectification, a ‘xeno-’ or ‘ethno-spectacle’ that the marketplace and public patrons now demand. In art criticism, curating, programming and historiography, as well as in the practice of many artists themselves, it would seem that we are trading in the commodity of difference, like *Star Wars* Klingons with Federation dollars. In what has been described as ‘the carnival of hetero-culture now at large in the metropolis’ (Gilroy 2004c: xix), ours may well be a time when difference in the arts is being as manically embraced as the little green men of old movies.

Exhibitions such as ‘Alien Nation’ serve to reveal some of the operational language and the complexities of Britain’s current politics of multiculturalism. In arts programming and the art market appetites have lately sharpened for ethnic, racial and cultural ‘difference and diversity’. It appears then as if the pleas for inclusion from those who were at the traditional margins of mainstream art history have finally been heard. These market-led developments have put artists under increasing pressure to provide an explicit codification of accepted forms of difference in their practice. The artist and researcher Sonya Dyer has described in her report on ‘artistic autonomy’ for the campaign group, the Manifesto Club, ‘the unhealthy pressure on artists and curators from non-white backgrounds to privilege their racial background above all else in relation to their practice’.⁷ This raises a serious concern that apparently radical terms of cultural analysis have achieved a popular currency without thereby achieving any real substantive change.

However, in the case of ‘Alien Nation’, I would argue that the exhibition transcended the need to privilege the ‘racial background’ that Dyer refers to. The goal of the exhibition was more about calling upon artists themselves to present a visual commentary on the legacies of exclusion and marginalization in the hegemonic spaces of art and film. Artists were not required to foreground or embody ‘race’ so much as to highlight and undermine the *racism* implicit or explicit in popular imagery. Yet although this stance is to be preferred over the more obviously market-led version, could Alien Nation still be considered just another, if not so intense, ‘unhealthy pressure’ on artists? I would answer this question by looking at whether black British artists are also exhibited in ways that succeed in decoupling them from the terms of both racism and ‘race’. Such exhibitions are unfortunately rare in comparison to the abundant opportunities available to signify cultural or diasporic ‘difference’.

The artist, curator and writer Rasheed Araeen described this situation as a sort of 'tyranny'. It emerges from modes of viewership that:

have very little to do with the specificity of art and which have now been appropriated by art institutions that use them to reinforce their colonial idea of the Other. This has helped them redefine postcolonial artists as the new Other, but also predetermine their role in modern society. With the result that any art activity which does not conform to or defies this new definition is looked upon as inauthentic and is suppressed. (Araeen 2000: 11)

In Araeen's view those who occupy spaces of migration and diaspora live and work persistently within the limits set by their viewers and are forced to negotiate official sources of support and institutionalized practices of art reception. Further, concerns about modern aesthetic criteria have been raised in relation to specific artworks generally only when their makers are white. Such criteria are ignored in preference to applying the tools of cultural and media studies for any art by black British practitioners. As I've been arguing, the vocabulary of cultural analysis has fully penetrated the promotion of black British artists and has served to challenge their marginal status. Nevertheless, their exclusion from the mainstream of art has continued. Those artists in Britain who had readily identified as 'diasporic' or 'postcolonial', and so subscribed to a cultural studies notion of art as media and text, have had to cope with some significant circumscribing of their practice. The expectation that black British artists make works that are best viewed merely as *cultural evidence* of their diaspora or postcolonial experience may have contributed to undermining their very aesthetic status *as art* and hence to the reinstatement, however unintended, of ethnic and racial hierarchies. What results then is an unsatisfactory form of inclusion and the very pervasiveness of models of cultural and media studies have made it difficult to see a way out of this insider-outsider predicament.

Concluding remarks

One approach to the dilemma might be to develop a new, vital role for cultural studies which attempts to understand more clearly how and why artists could positively transcend a reading of their art as only a medium for cultural and ethnic differencing or as merely a visual litany of 'diversity'. What is the sovereign place of art in the otherwise overdetermined landscapes of visual meaning that the artists in 'Alien Nation' inhabit? An answer can be traced through the exhibition's puzzle of elements, from Manhattan to Morecambe Bay and the dark side of Saturn. 'Alien Nation' provided a complex visual presence that seized on irony in order to turn current demands for 'alien' art on their head. Locke's series of sculptural pieces *Golden Horde* invites a humorous challenge to current fears about organized 'incursions' from the East. Ybarra takes the same tone, indicating how to undermine science-fiction xeno-types

and stereotypes through camp images. Newkirk locates a kind of group paranoia generated within orderly domesticity and again, makes references to science fiction; while Henna Nadeem's photographic works explore how practices of national nostalgia might be confronted with an 'outsider' defamiliarized transparency. Each of these artists operates in a common mediascape which helps to circulate hierarchical terms of difference. Yet they borrow, represent and articulate visual meaning with a view to resisting those dominant codifications, aiming to 'making sense' in contrary ways.

There is still room to ask however to what extent these artworks fully succeed in their intentions of staging or prompting resistance to dominant imagery, and whether the intended ironies of the exhibition are enough to sustain its overall critical purpose. Winner of the 2003 Turner Prize, artist Grayson Perry has indicated that: 'There seems to be a very new Labour idea that if we rigorously ensure a numerically fair proportion of BME (black or minority ethnic) practitioners, then that will automatically facilitate social justice in wider society. Hmm' (2007: 16). His suggestion is that the multicultural 'mainstreaming' of attention to art is not the same as more widely-reaching social, political and economic change. This assessment is similar to Martha Rosler's description of the situation in the USA during the 1990s, of 'an art world version of multiculturalism (and where more appropriately situated than in the realm of culture?), necessary but sometimes painfully formulaic, which produces a shadow constellation of the identities of the wider society but without the income spread'.⁸ These observations on the limited effects, both within and beyond the arts, of initiatives of social equality and cultural inclusion suggest that the critical use of vocabularies of diaspora, difference, postcolonialism and blackness have not fulfilled the ambitions of historically alienated artists. Indeed, considering how black British artists have negotiated these categories, much stands in the way of them finding the place they seek in the art mainstream.

It might be argued that the participation of black British artists in the contemporary art environment can never be guaranteed by the contribution of cultural and media theory. Indeed, this would explain why despite the energetic insistence on the value of paradigms of art as media and 'cultural text', black British artists have remained frustrated in their ambitions. The historian of philosophy Martin Dillon has named the indiscriminate use of such paradigms 'semiological reductionism', a conceptual apparatus whose ascendancy has brought regrettable outcomes. As he provocatively suggests, 'One way not to see the world is to read it as text' (Dillon 1995: 104). By coupling the area of visual art with the categories of ethnicity and difference (such as in concerns with 'blackness', or accounts of 'diaspora' consciousness), the continuing investment in reading the world as text has become deeply problematic. I therefore suggest that a more promising approach to resistance would be the emergence of alternative ways of relating to works of art. We need those works to be encountered as greater than a visible illustration of 'issues' for market promotion or for postcolonial study. So how might we apprehend the art of black Britain beyond its troubled significance as a medium of cultural significance and a visual token of cultural inclusion?

A decisive break from the current situation will not be achieved by simply aiming to avoid the familiar terms of description and the newly orthodox vocabulary of cultural and media analysis. Rather, we need greater care in our efforts to understand how works of art serve to mediate the political, ethnic and cultural economy of difference and postcoloniality. They act as mediators but also enjoy the status of creative projects capable of being detached, definable and distinct from media processes. It follows that studying the art of black Britain involves both acknowledging the usefulness of the analytical formulations of 're-presentation' and 'language, textuality, and signification' but also risking breaking away from dependence upon them (Hall 1996c: 1–17). If such paradigms have formed the stock-in-trade for postcolonial commentary and criticism they have also become the basis of current public expectations about this art, with often adverse results. Yes, art *is* textual, linguistic, signifying, representational, mediating, connective, codifying and context producing. But still art objects also have the ability to enable special kinds of outcomes by attracting and holding human attention in ways that are peculiar to their materials and historical milieu. In the case of the art of black Britain, works of art have generated room of their own for philosophical and critical work while stubbornly refusing the reductionism of being treated as material signs of difference. In any debate on the art of black Britain and post-colonial media there is a growing urgency to ask why art has a historical presence that media texts, signs and language may not.

Notes

- 1 'Alien Nation' was an ICA/inIVA exhibition curated by John Gill, Jens Hoffmann and Gilane Tawadros, at ICA London, 17 November 2006–14 January 2007, Manchester Art Gallery, 17 March 2007–7 May 2007 and Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts Norwich, 2 October 2007–9 December. Contributing artists included: Laylah Ali, Hamad Butt, Ellen Gallagher and Edgar Cleijne, David Huffman, Hew Locke, Marepe, Henna Nadeem, Kori Newkirk, Yinka Shonibare MBE, Eric Wesley and Mario Ybarra Jr.
- 2 See Wainwright (2005, 2006). Examples of exhibitions that have focused on a historical surveying/assembling of diaspora artists include: Beauchamp-Byrd *et al.* (1977); Araeen (1989); Chambers (1988).
- 3 These works by Locke appeared in 'Routes: Five Artists from Four Continents', at the Brunei Gallery, London (22 January–26 March 1998), the V&A (1999) and East International, Norwich (2000); see Robinson and Marsden (2005).
- 4 In his *Guardian* film blog, 'Modern Slaves without a Ghost of a Chance', director Nick Broomfield makes a direct link between the abolition of slavery in America and what he features in his film *Ghosts*: '*Ghosts* is a film about modern slavery and the Morecombe Bay cockling disaster. This year officially marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, yet there are currently three million illegal migrant workers in this country who can be classified as modern-day slaves. The government's attitude towards these people is hypocritical. They pretend they don't exist and refuse to recognise them. At the same time the UK economy would collapse without this pool of cheap labour'.
- 5 *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, 1992, directed by Brian Henson and starring

- Michael Caine as the miserly moneylender, Scrooge is one of the many film and musical adaptations of Charles Dickens's classic ghost story.
- 6 The exhibition was staged at Charleston Farmhouse, Sussex, 6–29 October 2006, in association with the Brighton Photo Biennial.
 - 7 To quote Sonya Dyer in full: 'Today, the institutionalisation of diversity policies means that art is being sidelined, and in many cases black artists are first and foremost regarded as black. This is clearly shown by the unhealthy pressure on artists and curators from non-white backgrounds to privilege their racial background above all else in relation to their practice. Black artists and curators are often expected to produce projects that are geared towards attracting a black and minority ethnic audience. One young British Asian curator I spoke to about this said that he had never felt "othered" until he began working in public galleries. It goes without saying that white artists and curators do not generally feel the same kind of pressure to appeal specifically to white audiences' (Dyer 2007: 11). See also: Dyer *et al.* (2007: 19–30).
 - 8 Rosler (1997: 20–4), quoted in Stallabrass (2004: 21). The first chapter of Stallabrass's study explores in further depth correlations between neo-liberal agendas such as these in the arts and those of the wider political economy. See also Žižek (1997: 28–51).