

# THE GHOSTS OF SONGS

THE FILM ART OF THE  
BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE

Edited by Kodwo Eshun & Anjalika Sagar



5. *Images of Nationality*, 1982–84

6. *Photographic Test, Expeditions*, 1982–84

7. *Twilight City*, 1989

commissions and retrospectives; I can think of recent exhibitions by film-makers as diverse as Chris Marker, Chantal Akerman, Atom Egoyan and Horace Ove. While never denying or excluding the possibilities of cinema exhibition, this relocation opens up new territory and unlocks contemporary readings.

*The Ghosts of Songs*, this new publication and exhibition, focuses upon BAFC's formal vision and poetry as well as the social and political questioning, and celebrates the transcendence of the films. To re-encounter the work once again in this new context is exhilarating and I hope will re-awaken interest and

debate around one of the most thought-provoking and creative collectives of talent in British film art. Painstakingly documented and curated by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar of The Otolith Group, *The Ghosts of Songs* foregrounds BAFC's innovative practice, and the exhibition and publication affirm FACT's mission to present work by artists that challenges perceived and prevailing views of media forms.









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## PREFACE

KODWO ESHUN  
& ANJALIKA SAGAR



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*Years ago I was in London, looking for the Black Audio Film Collective to whom I intended to give back the two VHS cassettes they had lent me, and I could never find the place, probably the address had changed. The tapes are still somewhere in my mess, as a remorse, but also the memory of a great work accomplished, to whom I'd love to render an homage if... (back to start)*

Chris Marker, 2006<sup>1</sup>



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Watching audiences watching Black Audio Film Collective's 1986 essay-film *Handsworth Songs* during the first afternoon of *Documenta 11*, replaying the attention people bestowed upon it later that evening, a curatorial proposition slowly began to emerge: could one invite audiences into spatial scenarios that allowed for distinctive kinds of encounter with the entirety of the Black Audio Film Collective's oeuvre? That initial tentative proposition was underwritten by the realisation that the critical attention bestowed upon *Handsworth Songs* had, inadvertently, overshadowed the Collective's body of work from 1983 to 1998.

Within a British, let alone an

international context, a generation had emerged with no real sense of the group's achievements in tape-slide, film, video, installation, no sense of their importance as inaugurators of a cinecultural practice. In the wake of *Documenta 11*, that amnesia began to change, rapidly; we witnessed the documentary turn spreading throughout contemporary art practice; soon after, the archival turn, announced by Hal Foster, could be discerned in many of the most intriguing works in today's artworld.

The work of BAFC seemed to us not only to complement but to complicate these notions of document, testimony, witness and archive; indeed, in its richness and its gravitas, their art posed fundamental

questions to image and sound by way of image and sound; questions that invited us to reconfigure the orthogonal orthodoxies of the black box. In this light, the risk entailed by our initial curatorial proposition seemed one that was entirely worth taking.

We spoke of our hypothesis with architect David Adjaye; not only had he always been intrigued by the work of BAFC but the invitation to displace and elude some of the norms of moving image practice proved too challenging to resist. The opportunity to collaborate with David has proved every bit as important as we hoped. His considerable experience has enriched the spatial vocabulary

8. Caroline Lee Johnson as Naomi  
*Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

9. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

10. Edward George as The Data Thief,  
*The Last Angel of History*, 1995

employed throughout *The Ghosts of Songs*; his design allows all kinds of audiences the possibility of encountering complex works through a series of implied narratives.

Gill Henderson, Ceri Hand and the staff and exhibition team at FACT have been central to the success of this project. Ceri has steered this project through its multiple incarnations with enthusiasm, tenacity and focus. Tom Trevor and Martin Clark at Arnolfini, Iwona Blaswick and Anthony Spira at the Whitechapel and Gus Casely Hayford, Cary Sawhney and Cylena Simonds at inIVA have been immensely helpful throughout this project; as partner institutions in this retrospective exhibition their role has been invaluable.

Rashid Ali and Yohannes Bereket at Adjaye Associates shepherded the design through its inauguration with skill and care.

Andrew Kirk and Simon Bell at Liverpool University Press have been expert editors and stout partners. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Avni Patel for her thoughtful, attentive design and her professionalism throughout a protracted production process. This project would not have been possible without the expertise of our exhibition organiser Kim Dhillon. We wish to extend our heartfelt thanks to Kim Evans, Sarah Wason, Julie Lomax and the staff at Visual Arts Office, ACE

for supporting this retrospective. Joan Leese and Eleanor Stanway at VET have provided invaluable expertise and we would like to extend our gratitude to them. Gary Stewart and Mannick Govinda have been staunch allies from the outset. Lyndsey Housden and Gabrielle Decamou provided administrative support when it was much needed. Tom Cabot provided valuable service.

Chris Marker, Adrian Rifkin, Anne Torregiani, Rose Fenton, Gillian Dickie, Walid Raad, Esi Eshun, Anand Patwardhan, John Seth, Coco Fusco, Greg Tate, Karen Alexander, George Shire and Isaac Julien offered advice and support. Rob la Frenais,

Saer M. Ba, Keith Piper and Sheila J. Petty provided precious archival materials at short notice. Jennifer Higgie, Sukhdev Sandhu, Rone Shavers, Niru Ratnam, Jorella Andrews and Irit Rogoff commissioned early versions of material that features in this monograph. Arthur Jafa's 1992 writing on cinema inspired much of the thinking here while Rich Blint generously provided the Henry James quotation. Christine Tomeh invited us to programme a mini-retrospective of BAFC at Cinema Empire Sofil, Beirut, in March 2006; Carole Squires invited us to screen *Who Needs A Heart* at the International Film Centre, New York in August 2006.

Above all, we wish to extend our deepest gratitude to all of the founding artists of BAFC, for their art which has provoked and challenged us and for their commitment to the future implied by an exhibition such as this. Both of us have known the artists since the 1990s. John Akomfrah, gracious and formidably learned. Lina Gopaul, the principled militant of the Collective. Reece Auguiste, the poet of the group. Avril Johnson, always attuned to the ambiguities of collective practice. Trevor Mathison, equally adept at drawing, photography, animation, video and sculpture as composition and sound design.



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11. Cassie McFarlane as Millie, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

12. Black Panthers, *Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur*, 1998



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Edward George, the brilliant writer, at home in fiction, criticism, statement and intervention. David Lawson whose marketing acumen and skill in communication and distribution ensured that the work of BAFC reached the festivals, art centres, kunsthallen, galleries, universities, newspapers and magazines across the world.

To visit the Collective at their offices in Ridley Road in Hackney throughout the mid-1980s and early 1990s, then at Greenland Street in Camden in the mid-1990s, was to be struck by the sense that the group functioned as a hub, positioned at the intersection of multiple avant-gardes

from India to Canada, USA to the Caribbean, Ghana to Germany, located at the heart of debates, arguments, positions and perspectives. BAFC were so bold; they were aesthetically fearless and personally gracious, intellectually formidable and singularly stylish. They dared, always, to be complex, and for this they were praised, rightly, and criticised, inevitably.

To maintain a collective practice for sixteen years is no easy task; behind the continuous production of films, videos, slide-tapes, photography, scripts, posters, flyers, courses, presentations, appearances, talks, essays, statements, film programmes,

screenings and seminars lies a seriousness of vision allied to an almost inconceivable effort. A vivid, vaulting ambition such as theirs undoubtedly took its toll; since the group dissolved in 1998, the seven founding artists have gone on to work separately, individually and in small units. The heroic days of collective practice have passed, as they must.

It is the kinds of questions the work made and continues to make possible that compels us to turn towards their art. To experience their work is to encounter a project in which life, art, poetics and politics were reformulated, moment by moment, so as to allow paradox,

ambiguity, complexity and intimacy their time and their place. It is this will to experiment that has had, and continues to have, a major impact, in numerous ways, on the practice of The Otolith Group. Think of *The Ghosts of Songs* as an initial inventory of the work of the Collective, a first registration of its effects; an opening encounter with the seven affects, intensities, passions, commitments, risks, gambles and demands of the Black Audio Film Collective.

1. Chris Marker, fax communication to the editors, 27th July 2006.

13. Donald Rodney, Diane Symons, Rothko Room, Tate Britain, *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time*, 1995

14. Edward George as The Dream Raider, Rotherhithe, *Memory Room 451*, 1997



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**IN LIVING MEMORY...  
ARCHIVE AND TESTIMONY  
IN THE FILMS OF THE BLACK  
AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE**

**JEAN FISHER**

*The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that  
the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not  
the exception but the rule.*

Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>



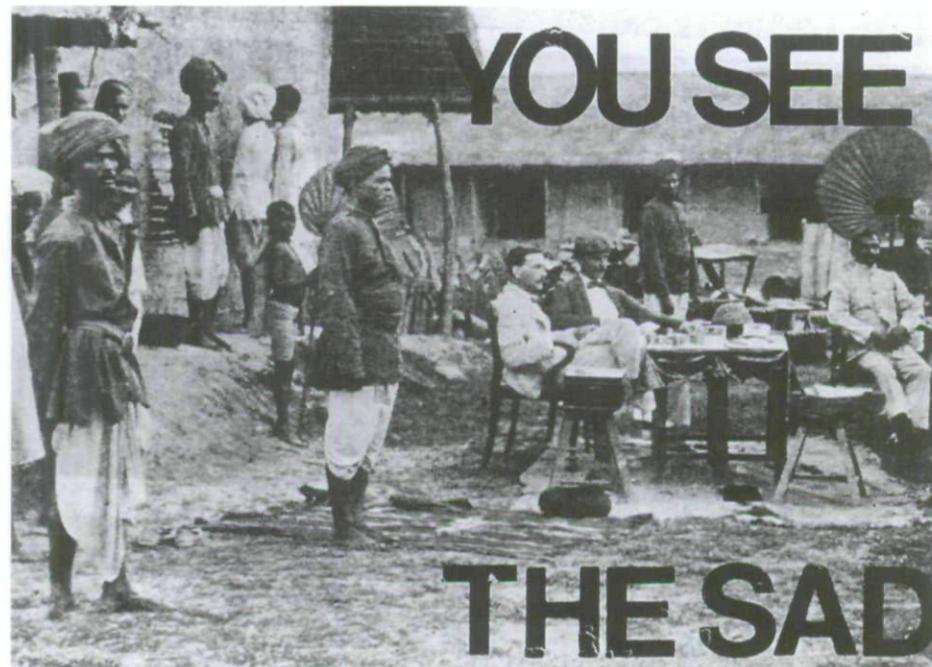


young African, African Caribbean and Asian artists emerging into the turmoil of race politics in the early 1980s, among them the founders of BAFC, John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguiste, Avril Johnson, Edward George and Trevor Mathison, soon to be joined by David Lawson. As BAFC's films demonstrate, language had to divest itself of the old rhetoric of lament and recrimination, too easily pacified by a few concessions, and invent a poetics of affect, beyond the scope of documentary media, that could penetrate beneath surface symptoms to the deeply buried psychic economy of race and belonging. The challenge and the exhilaration was to negotiate a new language from – to borrow a phrase from Deleuze – the impossibility of speaking, the impossibility of not speaking, the impossibility of speaking in the language of dominance. BAFC understood that what was required was a transformation of traumatic memory, to listen to its melancholic soundings and translate them into a form of critical reflection that could start the work of cultural mourning. More than most, the work of BAFC demonstrates the insight, acutely felt in trauma, that the present 'is not, but it acts', while the 'past never ceases to be'.

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BAFC emerged with *Signs of Empire* (1983), an innovative slide-tape, textual and sonic work whose elegant typographical image overlays announced the discursive space that their films were to open up: 'In the beginning – the archive – imperialism – the hinterlands of narrative – the impossible fiction of tradition – the treatise – in national identity – the decentred autobiography of Empire – the rhetoric of race...'

A slow dissolve of archival photographs of colonisers and 'natives', many of them more typical of intimate family albums than official historical records, are sparingly interrupted by short film clips – Asian tea pickers, black industrial workers, the fires of urban riots. Series of images cut to details of public monuments in angled shots that undermine the stability and permanence that such sculptures are intended to invoke. Throughout, repeated extracts from two political speeches expose the distance between myth and reality: one eulogising the multiracial unity of the British Commonwealth, the other expressing anxiety at the alienation of diasporic youth. In this way *Signs of Empire* presents an extraordinary, condensed soliloquy on a mythic British national identity that, constructed in the confidence of Empire, was now fragmenting under the uncertainties posed by the presence of diasporas



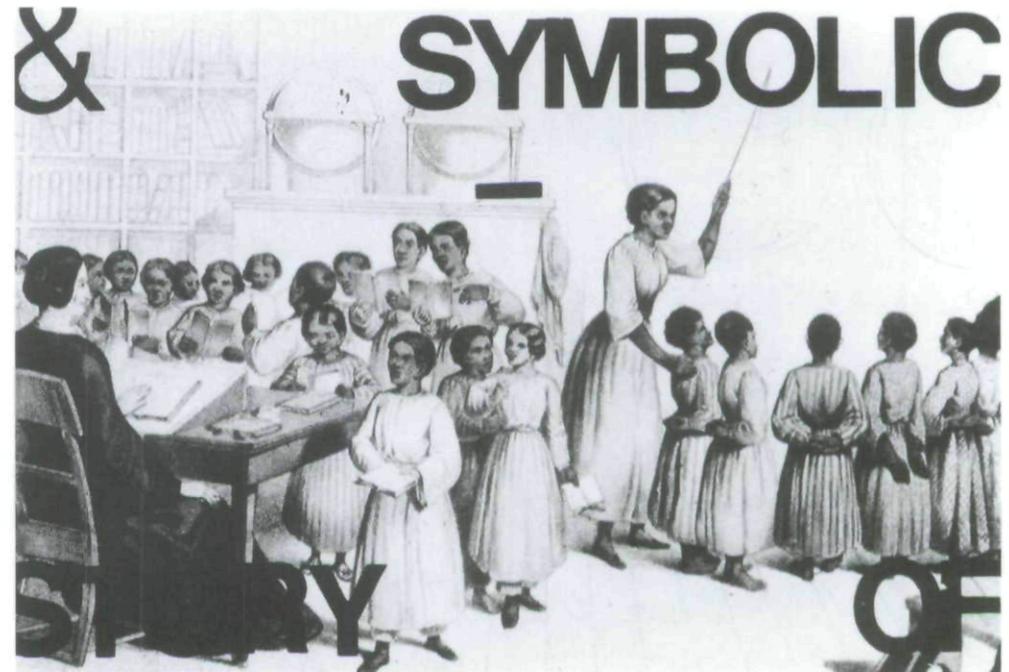
searching for their own sense of identity and belonging. The audio-track spatially extends this sombre trajectory, moving between an intimacy and distance resonant with the emotional ambivalences between whites and their black neighbours: beginning with an electronic *basso-profundo* that one might imaginatively locate in the bowels of a ship at sea, it segues to the fragmentary refrains of a classical orchestral piece and a melancholy chorale.

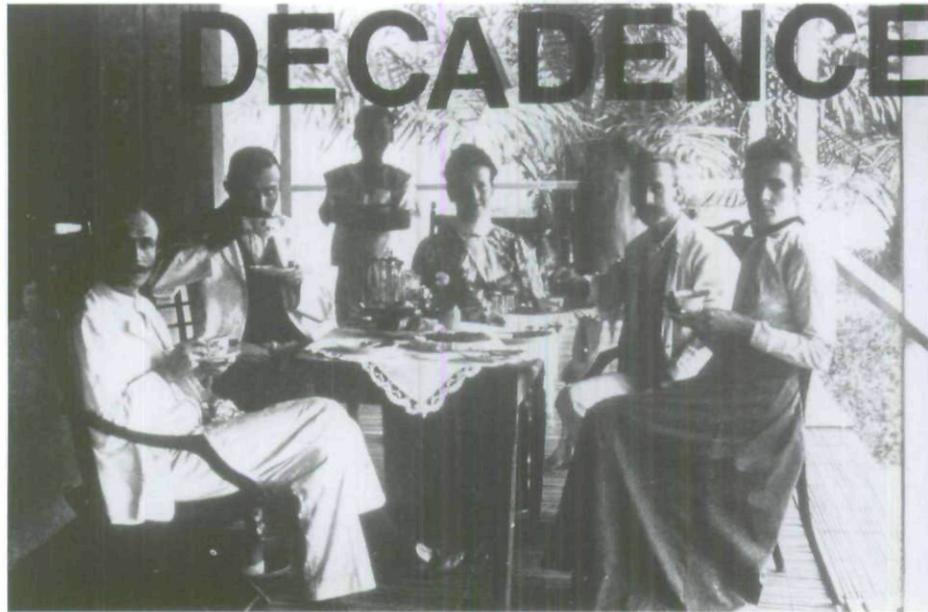
The work opens up a dialogical space of pure images and sounds through a constant framing and de-framing, a structuring to which slide dissolve particularly lends itself. Slide projection, an artistic and pedagogical medium, rests ambiguously between an animated still photograph and a decelerated film sequence, and relates to the more theatrically derived *tableau vivant*, which also privileges the image. In conventional film it is precisely the image we 'lose sight of' as it becomes sacrificed to a diegetic flow in which each successive shot cedes to the logic of its predecessor and to the overall logic of dialogue or commentary. By contrast, in *Signs of Empire* momentary arrest and periodic repetition pose the image as both a seduction and an opacity, disclosing the impenetrability of both the photographic referent and the historical context from which it derives; while each image, autonomous from the next, undermines spatial continuity to produce

the radical anti-narrative narrative that was to characterise all BAFC's films. By sampling the colonial archive, the historical discourse derived from it is dis-assembled, realigning the dismembered body of the past with the constellation of the present to 'decentre the autobiography of Empire'. The work closes with a black field bracketed by bands of blue then red, which, we subsequently learn in *Testament* (1988), are the Ghanaian colours of mourning, as if to announce a shift away from the disabling melancholy of separation and loss.

The question posed by *Signs of Empire*, and which emerges as a preoccupation of BAFC's subsequent films, is: How can the past and the present be made to communicate with each other? BAFC's radical solution, exemplified by their acclaimed film *Handsworth Songs* (1986), was to put into play several incommensurate but complementary discursive registers to produce an innovative 'film essay' style that was both poetic and political without being didactic: a montage of imagery drawn from the still photograph, the staged *tableau vivant* or dramatisation, filmed and archival footage; a polyvocality of recorded testimonies and intercessional poetic voice-overs that, contrary to the 'explanatory' panoptical impulse of the documentary narrator, build an oblique relation to the audiovisual track; and an

17–18. *Images of Nationality*, 1982–84

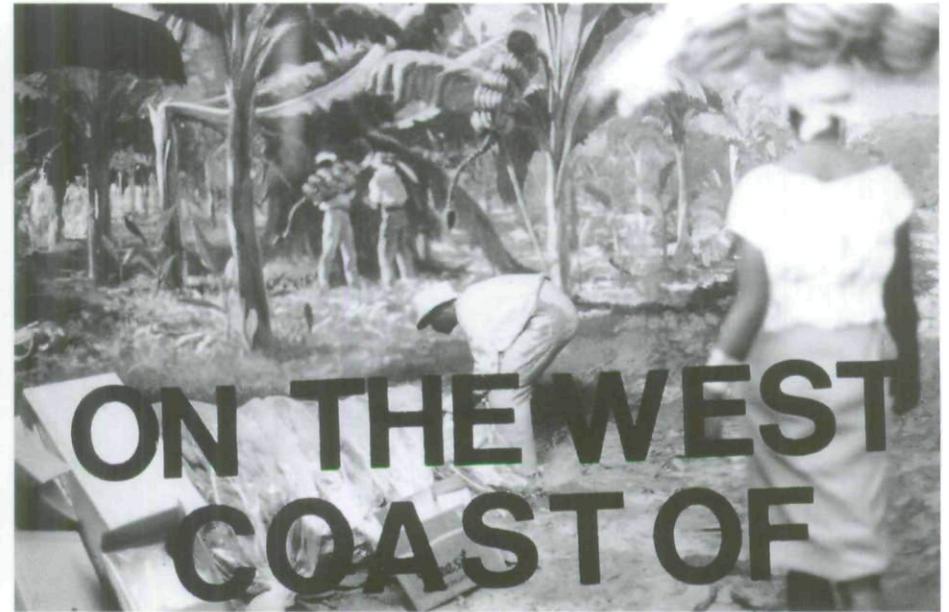




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immersive sonic space of sampled music and original electronic or digital composition, autonomous from the image, but animating it with an extended conceptual resonance. The result is a narrative that is not 'given' through any totalising or transcendental perspective, but emerges as a virtuality in the interstices between its different registers and in engagement with the imagination of the spectator. It is what Deleuze calls 'fabulation' – creative storytelling, and fulfils Fanon's ambition of an innovative politicised art in which the storyteller imaginatively transforms a people's stories of the past through the realities of the present.<sup>7</sup>

*Handsworth Songs* circulates around the 'race riots', which exposed to a complacent and uncomprehending society the traumatised 'state of emergency' in which the diasporic communities existed. The film begins with a black janitor in a museum of machinery from the industrial revolution, whose complicity with slavery is an undertone throughout the film, relayed through the soundtrack's machinic reverbs in concert with the refrains of British national songs. Archival footage of the disembarkation of fashionably dressed young black men and women from the *Empire Windrush*, alongside the film's repeated cuts to the innocent faces of young black schoolchildren and to cheerful dancehall scenes, testify to this



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19–21. *Images of Nationality*, 1982–84

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generation's hopes of establishing a new belonging. The poignancy of this bright optimism emerges gradually as the film simultaneously unfolds footage of depressed neighbourhoods, populist nationalist rhetoric, the riots and their aftermath, to reveal aspiration crippled by racism. Much of this emotional affect is quietly transmitted through a spare voice-over that poetically links past with present: 'For those who have known the cruelties of becoming... let them bear witness to the process by which the living transform the dead into partners in struggle.'

The film opens up a landscape of frustration, betrayal, disillusionment and

insecurity of a people in deadlock with an indifferent dominant society, against which violence becomes the only possible act of enunciation. It is, alongside the outpouring of speaking that accompanies it, what Michel de Certeau calls a 'capture of speech': an act of saying that is a 'freeing of imprisoned speech', and which takes the form of a refusal precisely because its testimony finds no ground in any prior discursive formation except as 'negation'.<sup>8</sup> If the protests in the socio-political sphere circulate around the right to belong as fully constituted citizens, its corollary in the cultural field was the right not to belong: to refuse the prescriptive identities and conditions of belonging imposed by a prejudicial society.



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*Handsworth Songs* astutely understands the significance of this 'capture of speech' through attentiveness to the sounds and silences of language itself. From behind the police barricades, the camera observes the press, gathering only for sensational images and headlines, contrasting them with eyewitness accounts that testify to a systemic failure in the authorities' attitudes to immigrant neighbourhoods. Criminalisation of black youth and draconian policing strategies of containment and discrimination had culminated in the death of grandmother Mrs Cynthia Jarrett in her home, a violation of the boundaries between public and private space through which the black population realised their

vulnerability. Political pundits and neighbourhood leaders assemble to 'explain' the causes of discontent – depressed housing, unemployment, poor educational opportunities, lack of political agency. But as the film makes very clear this existing language of class struggle was inadequate to address a much deeper malaise at the heart of British society, one that was rooted in the inner contradictions of its imperial past. As one of the film's most quoted lines goes, 'there are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories...'

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If *Handsworth Songs* was an exploration of the historical roots of a troubled British

22. Handsworth Songs, 1986

23. British icons tableau,  
*Handsworth Songs*, 1986

24. *Twilight City*, 1989

25. Location photograph, Mohandas Gandhi statue,  
Tavistock Square, London, *Twilight City*, 1989



post-imperial national identity as it condensed around its diasporic communities, other films addressed the spatial complexities of cultural routes through the geographies of the Black Atlantic. In these films, BAFC increasingly comes to combine archival material with testimonial memory, problematising the claims to 'truth' of the different registers of documentary and fiction.

*Twilight City* (1989) presents an imaginary epistolary narration of a young woman's thoughts as she writes to her mother in Dominica about the changing face of London, then in the throes of the new Docklands development. She fears it is a city that her mother would not now recognise should she return. The film cuts between this narrative voice and interviewees bearing witness to their youthful experience of the city as a territory mapped by racial, cultural, sexual, gender and class boundaries, a place 'of people existing in close proximity yet living in different worlds' (Paul Gilroy). This polyvocal narrative moves restlessly back and forth between past and present, reflecting on the loss of roots and erasure of history caused by the demolition of old established neighbourhoods. The further displacement of already marginalised communities falls under the shadow of the film's recurrent motif of the public monument to a heroic British imperial history notable for its

effacement of its diasporic descendants.<sup>9</sup>

The camera scans the financial city's façades by day and cruises its neon-lit streets by night, returning repeatedly to the image of water, registering changing mood and time through shifting colours. This is linked to archival footage of the old Pool of London, where ships once unloaded their cargo from the colonies and where the lives of Africans and East Indies merchant seamen were 'beached' by an indifferent society.<sup>10</sup> In revisiting these traces of the past, *Twilight City* discloses the disavowed longevity of the black British presence, 'deeply entangled in the history of the city' and with 'their own investment in a city of their own history and memories'. Long before the city became a subject of aesthetic reflection, *Twilight City* explores the metropolis as not only the focal point of the circulation of production and consumption but also of the hopes and disappointments of people.<sup>11</sup>

Water, a recurrent motif in BAFC's films, links *Twilight City* to *Testament*, an elegiac dramatisation of the painful return of a successful diasporic subject (a TV presenter) to a Ghana she left following the fall of Nkrumah's government. The film is bracketed by two key scenes: at the outset we see a man deliberately drowning in a river; at the end we see the protagonist standing over an open earthen grave. There is a world of difference



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between these two references to death: in the former the water suggests the fluidity of continuity (and the film tells us that in Ghana, rivers are the deities of memory); in the latter there is a dry finality to death, an irrevocable burial of the traces of the past. River or ocean, both imaginatively evoke a space of impenetrable depth like history itself, of ebbs and flows that figure both the separation and unity of space and time in a recurrence that, like the writing of the letter in *Twilight City*, attempts to grasp a fleeting memory as it 'flashes up in a moment of danger'.

On a formal level, the shots of water signal a 'cut' or interval that separates

series of images and renders them what Deleuze calls time- or 'memory-images' that work inside the film against narrative continuity and outside as metonymic sign of the continuities and discontinuities of diasporic experience. The 'cut' as a rhythmic interval has been proposed as the primary structural element of a black aesthetic rooted in the drum. However, what receives less attention is the non-European, complex 'vertical' chord structure and progression of jazz composition that may find an equivalent in the equally complex serialisation and recombinant image-sonic structure of BAFC's films.<sup>12</sup> Time here is not spatialised into a conventional narrative logic; instead, it is dislocated and temporalised as a folding

and refolding of disparate times, locations and points of view. As a consequence, the affect of the films functions obliquely, at the periphery of vision-audition, in the interstices of image and image, image and sound, to problematise and decentre the gaze, such that meaning shimmers elusively between the knowable and the ungraspable, the legible and the illegible, like a dreamscape.

In the dreamscape, there is no direct equivalence between its manifest and latent contents, between its representations and those unconscious workings of desire that produce them. To disclose the repressed meaning buried in memory's 'forgotten' archive of traumatic events

as it returns in the obscurity of lapsus or dream demands, according to Freud's psychoanalytic schema, the work of analysis-translation – or 'archaeology'.<sup>13</sup> If the psychoanalytic scenario was to enable the self-alienated individual to understand himself as the mutual inscription of present and past through his own testimony, analogously BAFC films work within the aporias between the historical archive and testimonial memory as a path to reconfiguring diasporic subjectivities, producing a powerfully poetic and political enunciative voice, remarkable in that a cohesive aesthetic is developed collectively rather than individually. Deleuze calls this procedure 'putting everything into a trance', meaning

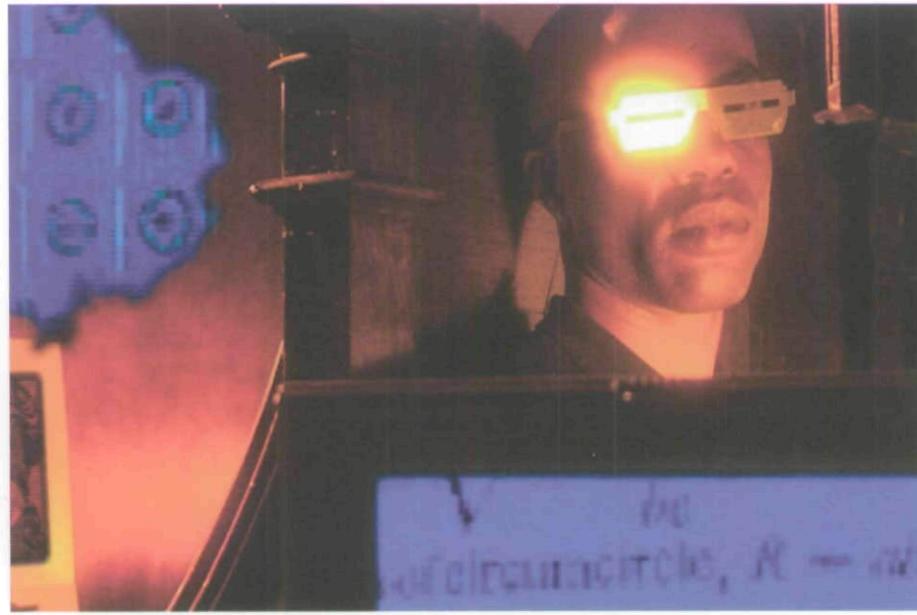
26–28. Tania Rogers as Abena.  
*Testament*, 1988

29. *A Touch of the Tarbrush*, 1991

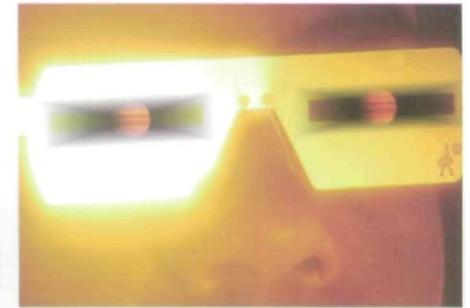
30–31. Edward George as The Data Thief,  
*The Last Angel of History*, 1995



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a kind of agitation – a transition or becoming in which the speech-act is made possible through the ‘ideology of the coloniser, the myths of the colonised, and the discourse of the intellectual... in such a way that story-telling is itself memory, and memory is the invention of a people... not the myth of a past people, but the story-telling of a people to come.’<sup>14</sup>

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*The concept of archive shelters the memory of arkhe – but also forges it.*

Jacques Derrida<sup>15</sup>

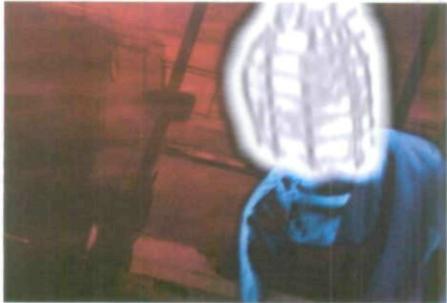
BAFC’s creative storytelling makes it clear that there can be no simple excavation of the historical archive that would reveal some indelible truth. Derrida traces the word archive to the ancient Greek *arkhe*, meaning ‘at the origin’; but also to *archaeion* – meaning the house of the magistrate who makes the law, holds the official documents, and who thus holds the power of interpretation. In our time, it is hegemonic culture – government and media – that assembles the historical archive, withholds or releases its contents and authorises its interpretative discourses. These are all too subject to ideological manipulation: as BAFC suggest in *Mysteries of July* (1991), people’s lives are subject to an ‘ongoing political reconstruction’,

which obliterates transmissible experience. For the diasporic artist to disarticulate this archive is, then, a subversive act insofar as it usurps the power of authority to control meaning.

Interpretation and translation are central to the archive since it is not some ready-to-hand body of knowledge but a labyrinth of fragments from the past, made up of gaps and inconsistencies as well as thematic coincidences: according to Agamben, it is the ‘system of relations between the said and the unsaid’.<sup>16</sup> As such the archive is always in process, subject to additions, subtractions and reconfigurations, which are interventions of the present, conditioned by new

experiences and perspectives: the mute voices of the dead speak only through the desires of the present. Thus, as Derrida says, ‘the question of the archive is not [...] the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not [...], it is a question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.’<sup>17</sup>

It is this promise and responsibility – both to those dispossessed ghosts of the past and to the generations yet to come – that renders BAFC’s use of the archive an act of witnessing and of remembering and by extension an ethical challenge to dominant society. It is never simply



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32. The Dream Raider, *Memory Room 451*, 199733. Dela Williams as Man in River, *Testament*, 198834. Mo Sesay as Clifford, Laura Sampredo, Daniela Wol as Dream Raiders, *Memory Room 451*, 199735. Octavia Butler, *The Last Angel of History*, 1995

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a question of constructing a counter-narrative to the dominant one, which is still to acknowledge its prior authority, but of undermining its very structure through exposing its aporias and contradictions; by, as Kobena Mercer points out in reference to *Handsworth Songs*, disarticulating and rearticulating its language to create a polyphonic resonance 'in which the possibility of social change is prefigured in collective consciousness by the multiplication of critical dialogues'.<sup>18</sup> The radical nature of BAFC's films lies in their attentiveness not only to what is said in the archive but also to what is unsaid – to the imprint or trace of memory in witness testimony that the official account seeks to obliterate.

Testimonial memory disturbs the official narratives of the archive because, like poetics, it is a form of enunciation not yet positioned in and by discourse. And yet, as Stuart Hall says, it tells a story that inevitably speaks from a 'position', an experience inscribed politically and geographically.<sup>19</sup> Witness testimony, beyond scientific authentication, nevertheless puts under erasure the 'truth' of historical narrative and its system of judgement since, as Agamben states, the aporia figured by it is the very aporia of historical knowledge: 'a non-coincidence between facts and truth, verification and comprehension'.<sup>20</sup> Agamben's analysis is drawn from the accounts of Auschwitz, where, he points

out, the actual object of the witness testimony is not the gas chambers, but those traumatised prisoners known as 'walking corpses', who represented a 'limit situation' in which the human crossed a threshold into the inhuman, no longer capable of witnessing anything, even their own death. The survivor, by definition outside the experience, much like our relation to the past, could only witness the absence of witness. But for Agamben this signalled an insoluble bond between the human and the inhuman – speaking and its lack are predicated upon each other. Testimony is the 'system of relations between the sayable and unsayable, the possibility and impossibility of speech', by which the subject itself is constituted.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps here we can begin to see the significance of BAFC's attentiveness to the sounds and silences of language, and how the development of a new aesthetic language from the mute voices of the past was central to the renewal of black subjectivities. Agamben's 'limit situation' might equally describe the dehumanising of the black self to an (expendable) body of labour under slavery that the British post-war use of an immigrant workforce did little to dispel. If for the postmodern West the crisis of History is that time could no longer be measured against the eschatological destiny of the Apocalypse, for Africa and its diaspora the Apocalypse had already

happened, the future was already the past.

In two late films, *The Last Angel of History* (1995) and *Memory Room 451* (1997), BAFC plays elliptically across this apocalyptic, transgressive (as opposed to progressive) temporality. *The Last Angel of History* is an essay 'about' the relation between the African diaspora and science fiction genres, focusing initially on the music of George Clinton's funk 'Mothership Connection', Sun Ra's Afrofuturist jazz, Lee Perry's reggae and Derrick May's Detroit techno, and constructed in part through interviews with black musicians and novelists. The radicality of Afrofuturist music, as Kodwo Eshun says in the film, lies in the fact that it had nothing in common with black music of the street or stage; created electronically or digitally in the studio, this was 'impossible, imaginary music' all the more powerful because it 'didn't reflect the past but imagined a future'. The instrument of liberation was the electronic synthesizer which, with the advent of digitalisation, opened up the possibility of 'digitalised race memory... black music condensed on a chip' (Greg Tate) – a sonic archive that 'made chronological time irrelevant'.

Afrofuturism has nonetheless a deeper resonance. The film elaborates on a comment made earlier by Akomfrah that Britain 'feared it had produced a surplus mutant population that had no roots,

no connectedness, to home, elsewhere or here'.<sup>22</sup> The mutant is traced to the 'limit situation' of slavery's African body as labour/machine, re-figured as popular culture's anxious image of the alien, robot or cyborg. Blacks, as Eshun points out, 'lived the estrangement that sci-fi writers talk about': alien abduction, spaceships, genetic transformation. For Eshun, black subjects enacted the man-machine interface in order 'to explore the mutations that have already happened to them'. As the film repeatedly states: 'The line between social reality and science fiction is an optical illusion'.<sup>23</sup> We could not have a clearer demonstration of the philosophical conundrum of the human as historical being – that the past is not something that has happened to us, but is what afflicts us as a haunting from the future.

*The Last Angel of History* is narrated from the point of view of a Data Thief from the future looking for 'technofossils' that would provide the key to his future, a critical meditation perhaps on BAFC's own role as pirates of the obscure seas of the past. The Afrofuturist theme continues in *Memory Room 451*, in which the film plays on the paradox of reminiscence, between the necessity to remember and to forget, between nostalgia and renewal. The intercessor or Narrator tells of alien 'dream raiders' returning from the future to abduct twentieth-century ghosts to record their

dreams for 'TV 3000' by reading their hair: 'dead material from the graveyard of time'. The ghosts are staged dramatisations – in screen duration but referring to other temporalities – of first-person reminiscences of everyday conversations that circulate around changing fashions and ambivalent attitudes to black hairstyles: a man speaks of relocating from Alabama to New York where he can more safely express his dandyism; a woman speaks of the erotic charge of the Afro wig. The anecdotes recur episodically, multiplying the temporal and spatial strata of a black socio-political history of desire and aspiration drawn through the sensuality of touch, body and gesture – those everyday social

human interactions that give meaning to people's lives. Throughout modernity, fashion has been one of the primary signifiers of the search for identity articulated through masquerade and identification, and the aesthetic realm of freedom in the becoming subject of diasporic black selfhood. Towards the end of the film, however, the Narrator describes how an apocalyptic event in the dream raiders' future has severed them from the ghosts of the past; now bereft of listeners, the ghosts can only tell their stories to one another. 'Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns,' as Benjamin comments, 'threatens to disappear irretrievably.'<sup>24</sup>



36. Edward George and Lina Gopaul, Handsworth, Birmingham, 1985

37. Avril Johnson, Lina Gopaul  
Ridley Road, London 1985



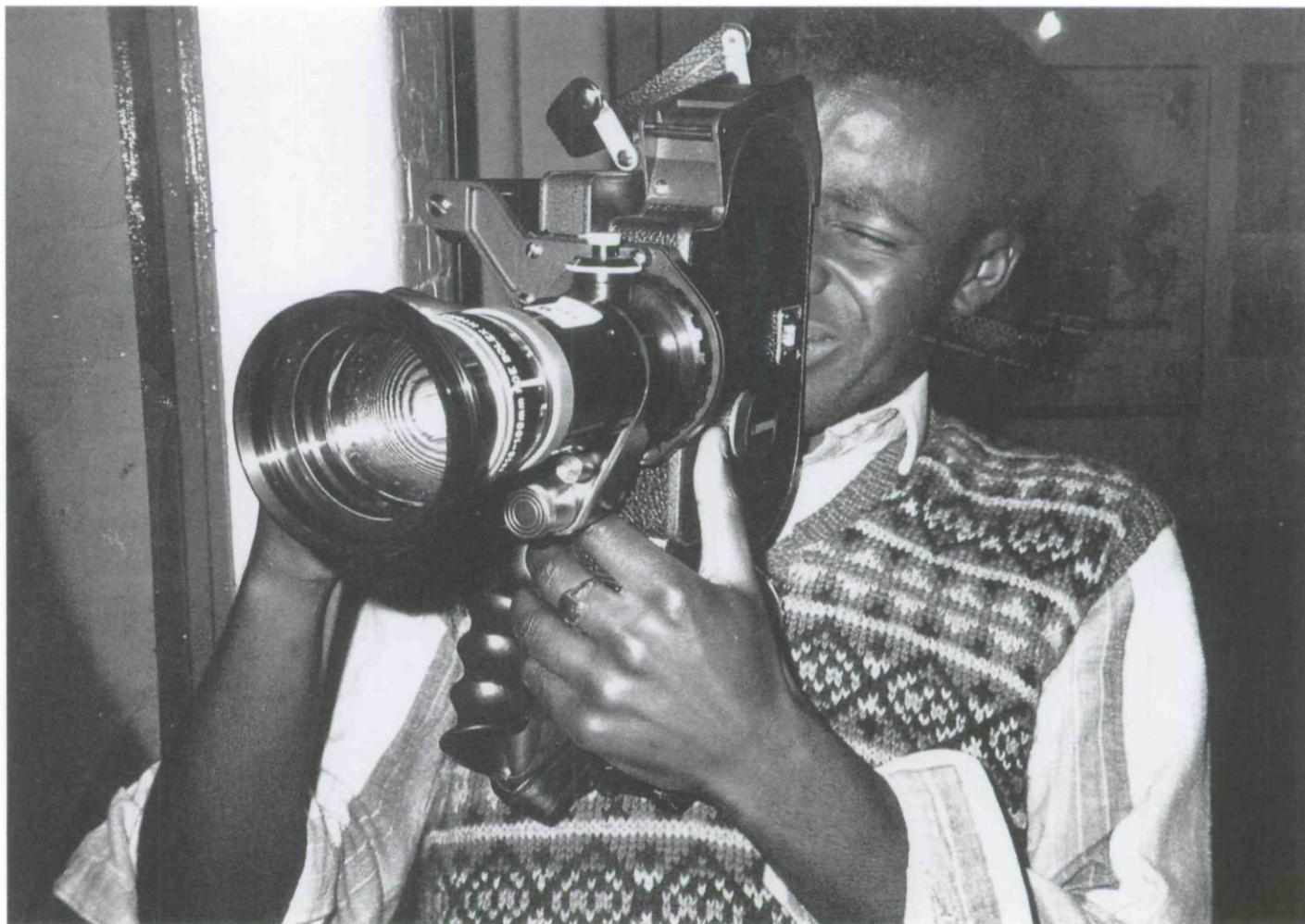
Benjamin could not have predicted that the very technology that had dismissed the storyteller and listener was, in the hands of BAFC, to become the instrument of their return, and in epic scale but lyric form. In an intense conversation between sound and imagescape, narrative is reclaimed to the realm of experience, transmitted to the films' audience through recorded living speech and imaginative invocations of the archive. True to the function of the storyteller as the bearer of collective enunciations, BAFC circumvents the single authorial voice of conventional documentary, opening a performative and hermeneutic space for the listener. Hence, against the totalising space of information, we are given an aesthetic space of reflection on a 'state of emergency' that is now visibly our world historical situation. As such, this is a poetics that eloquently bears

witness to the fragile interval between speaking and not being able to speak, an act of testifying that, as Agamben insists, is itself the visible trace that unites the inhuman and the human, the past to the future. Moreover, language is both a speaking and a listening: the witness needs a listener to bear witness to, so that stories can be retold, and the archive be available to the transformative needs of the future. This is the ethical demand BAFC's films place on us: that we be attentive to a language that speaks not only to the traumatic trajectory of diasporic history but also to the aporia that is the essence of a shared human origin and destiny. As such, while responding to a particular historical moment, BAFC's films are timeless.



## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 257.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, New York: Zone Books, 1988, p. 55.
3. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, p. 89.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, London: The Athlone Press, 1989, p. 216.
5. See Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text*, 54, Spring 2001, pp. 89–100.
6. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 1–10.
7. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Constance Farrington, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 193.
8. Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, trans. Tom Conley, Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 1997, pp. 11–12.
9. See also Kodwo Eshun, 'Twilight City: Outline for an Archaeopsychic Geography of New London', *Wasafiri*, 2004, pp. 7–13.
10. *A Touch of the Tar Brush* (1991) picks up this history of abandonment and relocates it in present-day Liverpool, another colonial slave port that has been home to a 'forgotten' community of 'mixed race' families for more than 200 years.
11. The city in the age of post-industrial globalisation was a thematic focus of *Documenta 11*, Kassel, 2002, and *Handsworth Songs* was included in *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition*. See the notes on the film by Mark Nash in the exhibition's *Short Guide*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002, pp. 36–37.
12. In discussing what might constitute an 'essential black cinema', John Akomfrah states that, rather than it residing in rhythm or the cut as suggested by the cinematographer Arthur Jaffa, it may be in the frame. See Kass Banning, 'Feeding off the Dead: Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary: An Interview with John Akomfrah', *Border/Lines*, 29/30, 1993, pp. 28–38. Given the complexity of BAFC's image structure, another analogy with music presents itself, namely the complex chord structure and progression of jazz.
13. Sigmund Freud, 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' [1906], in *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 27–118. Freud persistently drew an analogy between archaeology and the psychoanalytic process of recollection: 'Burial by repression, excavation by analysis'.
14. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 222.
15. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 2.
16. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books, 2002, p. 145.
17. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 36.
18. Kobena Mercer, 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain', in *Welcome to the Jungle*, New York and London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 53–66.
19. Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 58.
20. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 12.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
22. Quoted in Banning, 'Feeding off the Dead', p. 36.
23. A sentence borrowed from Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991.
24. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 255.



38. Sebastian Shah, Director of Photography  
*Handsworth Songs*, 1985

39. John Akomfrah, *Handsworth*, 1985







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HP5



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3A

SAFETY



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4A

FILM

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SAFETY

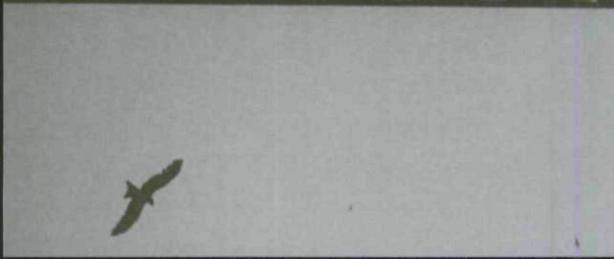


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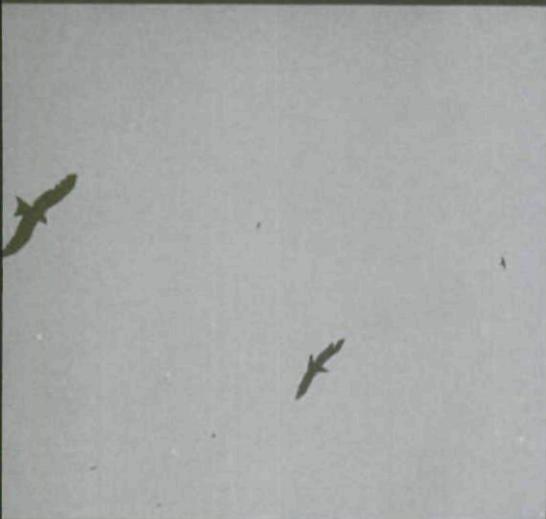
40. Lina Gopaul, David Lawson, Handsworth, 1985

41. Edward George, Trevor Mathison,  
Handsworth, 1985

42 - 44. Contact sheet, *Testament*, 1988

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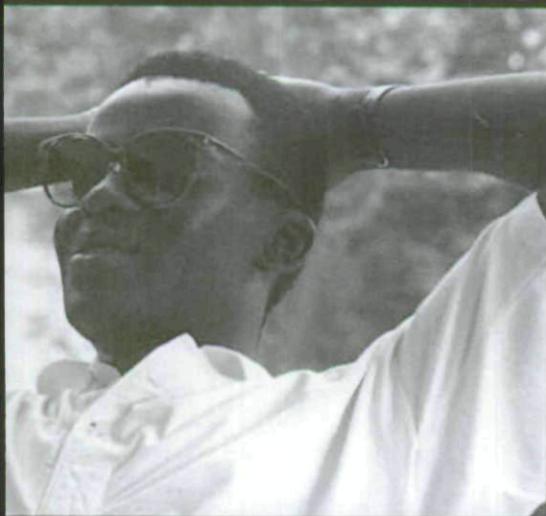
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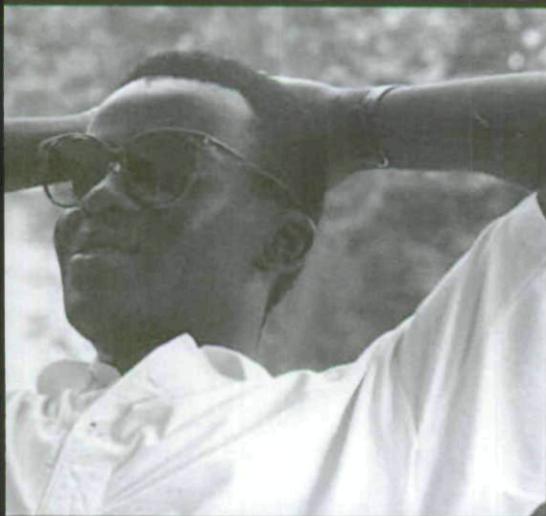
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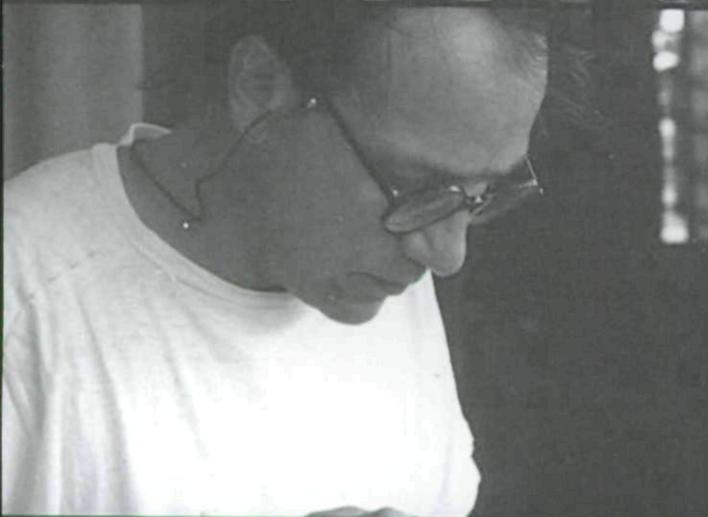
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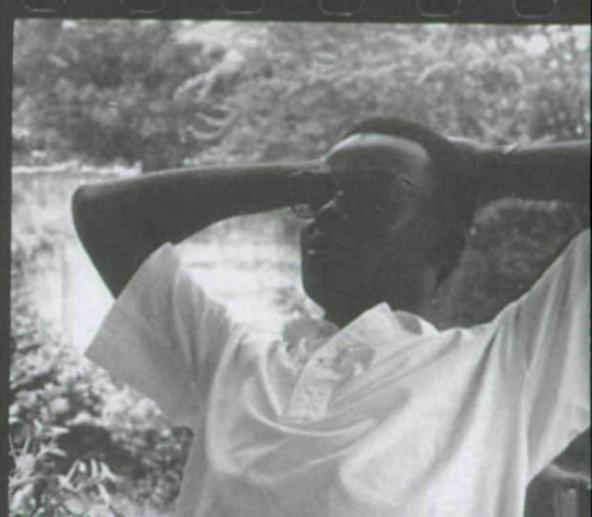
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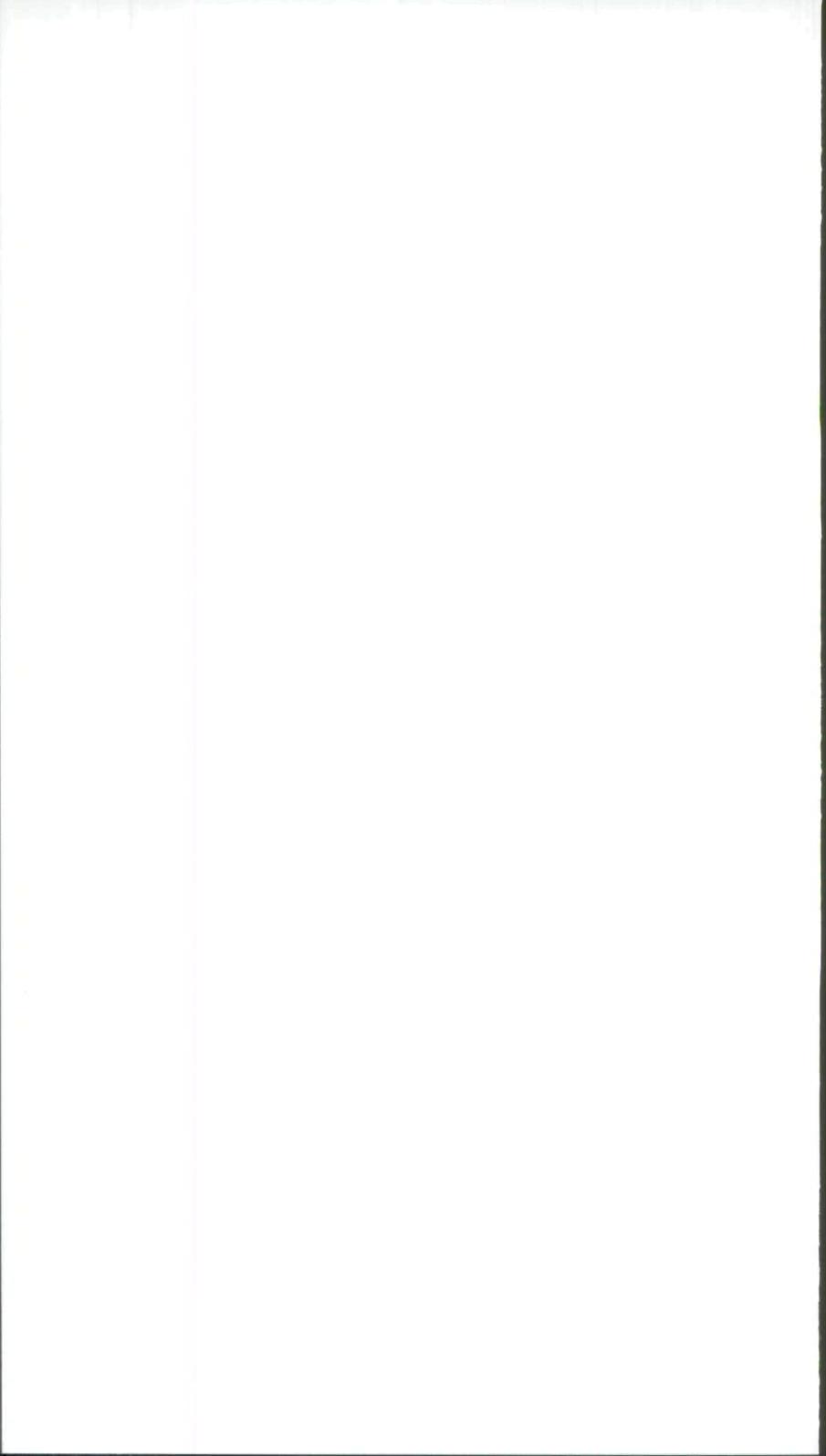






45. Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, *Twilight City*, 1989  
46. Jonathan Collinson, director of photography,  
Edward George, Avril Johnson, *Twilight City*, 1989  
47. Reece Auguiste, *Mysteries of July*, 1991  
48. Seamus McGarvey, camera assistant, Reece Auguiste,  
Christopher Hughes, lighting cameraman, Bethnal Green  
Hospital, London, *Mysteries of July*, 1991







## POST-COLONIAL TRAUERSPIEL

KOBENA MERCER



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The very last scene in *Testament* (1988) consists of a shot/reverse-shot sequence in which Abena, the story's protagonist, is stopped in her tracks by the sight of an opened grave. The skull she sees within the broken crypt appears to look back at her and we hear her catch her breath as the film fades to black. The encounter elicits an uncanny moment of delayed recognition, for Abena has been wandering the landscape throughout the eighty-minute length of the film as if she were a ghost herself: she has been gripped and possessed by the force of enigmatic pressures that resist her conscious remembrance.

By virtue of its temporal placement at the film's ending, the uncanny effect of delayed recognition is not unlike the perceptual disturbance exerted by Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533). It is only when leaving the geometral position of the painting's monocular viewing plane that the spectator can begin to 'see' the peculiar squiggle of shapes and lines in the foreground as a readable mark of signification. 'What is this strange, suspended, oblique object in the foreground in the front of these two figures?' asked Lacan. 'Begin by walking out of the room in which no doubt it has long held your attention. It is then that, turning round as you leave – as the author of the *Anamorphoses* describes it – you

apprehend in this form ... What? A skull.'<sup>1</sup> John Akomfrah's mode of film direction brings the contemporary viewer into an encounter with something in the cinematic image that is equally inexplicable, for the final shot in *Testament* has a matter-of-fact quality that belies its narratological significance as the concluding moment that confers retroactive cohesion upon the storytelling process of the film.

Abena is a television reporter who has returned to Ghana after years of exile in Britain following the 1966 military coup that overthrew the country's first independent government led by Kwame Nkrumah. Ostensibly, she has travelled to Ghana to report a story about Werner

49. Arthur Jafa, director of photography, *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993

50. Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533

51. Cemetery of Abena's parents, *Testament*, 1988

Herzog, who is filming *Cobra Verde* (1989) on location. Attempts to obtain an interview break down and in any case this plotline is something of a 'McGuffin' – a red herring of meta-cinematic referencing that nonetheless drives Abena's story forward. As she journeys through the country, she visits friends who were also fellow activists in the Convention Peoples Party that rose to power when Ghana became independent in 1957. However, no one wants to know: Danso refuses to speak to her and Mr Parkes talks in the esoteric idiom of lotto numbers. Rashid, who has also converted to Islam, is the one former friend most sympathetic to Abena's musings as she is driven forward



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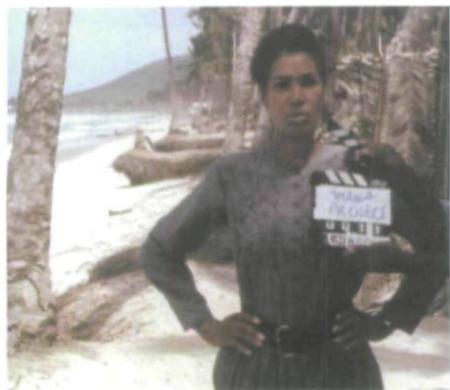
beyond this wall of silence by a quest for something she cannot quite name.

Cross-cutting alternations between archival and diegetic segments deliver Abena into a 'war zone of memories' (the film's subtitle): flash-backs reveal that she was forced to betray her friends when the Nkrumah Ideological Institute was shut down by the coup, while archive newsreels document the tumultuous rise and fall of Pan-African socialism. Torn apart at the crux of public history and private memory, the character of Abena inhabits the terrain of the 'unknowable' that each of BAFC's films address as a body of work that patiently explores the slow time it takes to come to terms with

post-colonial trauma. *Handsworth Songs* (1986) paid witness to the conflicted relationship between past and present in post-war Britain by revealing an epic disphasure between the private memories of black life contained in family photographs, as documents that testify to diaspora experiences of immigration, and the official public records of the archive, as an institution of social memory to be found in yesterday's monumental statues and today's television reportage. 'Something has gone terribly wrong,' cried a voice on the soundtrack: rather than resolve the crisis of knowledge by appealing to a consensus among different points of view, BAFC's mode of enquiry opens a space of poetic reflection in which

the limitations of all of cinema's available representational systems are put into question. Instead of a synthesis of memory and history, their films underscore an irreconcilable agonism, for gaps, absences, distortions, fabrications and contradictions arise on all sides: the forces of erasure, forgetting and denial are as active in shaping family mythologies contained in snapshots and home movies as they are in shaping national mythologies that are based on the selective filtering of the collective past.

'We went to Ghana to try to make a film about Kwame Nkrumah, but also about a movement and a body of ideas that simply don't exist any more,' explains



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Akomfrah. 'They'd been swept away not just by the force of historical events but also by attempts on the part of successive governments after Nkrumah's to basically bury the man and all that he stood for. There is something metaphorically significant in that act because so much of diasporic history rests precisely in that gap between history and myth.'<sup>2</sup>

Where historical events are 'buried' in the gaps and fissures of the state archive as a result of political repression, *Testament* reveals that individual memories are also irretrievable when normative patterns of psychical repression are reconfigured by colonial trauma. To the extent that 'history' cannot be reconstructed as an object

of positivist knowledge in situations where the colonial archive is structured by gaps, compactions and distortions that are ordinarily covered over by myth and ideology, one might say that the 'subjectivity' of formerly colonial peoples cannot be recovered or represented as a lost plenitude of former wholeness, for knowledge of the past is made equally unavailable to memory when events have been 'buried' in the unconscious on account of their overwhelming pain. As 'a film about the search for the emotional core that binds a person to place', *Testament* is about Abena's radical un-binding, for the emotional ties that suture psyche and history are unravelled by what is repressed and unsaid in the colonial



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scene. As an exile who returns home only to be thrown into a condition of transcendental homelessness, she discovers 'the effect of the lack of an archive on the diaspora persona'.<sup>3</sup> Abena's tale is not actually a 'testament' at all, for what the film portrays is the impossibility of producing testimony in the historical context of the post-colonial realities that have traumatised her inner world.

Like each of BAFC's films, *Testament* generates narrative out of a structural 'combinatory' of five basic elements: original pro-filmic material, archive footage, synch-sound, voice-over narration and ambient sound design. To grasp the affective agency that the archival element

52. Open grave of Abena's father, *Testament*, 1988

53. Tania Rogers as Abena, BBC Reporter, *Testament*, 1988

54. Tania Rogers as Abena, Evans Francis as Rashid, *Testament*, 1988

55. Mr. Parkes waits for Abena, *Testament*, 1988



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exerts as the jewel in the crown of the Black Audio combinatory close attention must be given to its role in the structuration of the montage. Far from playing an anchoring or fixative role, as it does in documentary realism, BAFC's aestheticised handling of the archive imparts a dynamic and liberating energy to these 'unknowable' fragments. The multiple voice-over does not caption the image into denotative closure but teases out the connotative potential of anonymous visual data to maximise its polysemic qualities. Faced with unclassified scraps from public and private sources (accessed through the extensive research process that initiates each film), scriptwriter Edward George

has crafted a lyric form of metonymic proliferation in which a surplus of aphorisms and little stories are coaxed out of the multi-accentual properties of the 'found image'. Above all, sound designer and composer Trevor Mathison has engineered an ambient realm in which loops, drones, sirens and sustained tonal notes encourage the viewer's attention to wander into a state of drift. Mathison's compositions play an important 'binding' role in melding the disparate visual materials, and in this sense his sound design acts as an acoustic mirror or semiotic chora that provides what Winnicott calls a 'holding environment'.<sup>4</sup> Black Audio arrangements induce a becalmed space of critical reverie that allows the viewer

to be touched by the strange emotions evoked by the archival material without being overwhelmed by their 'unknowable' quality as orphaned images.

Black Audio were the first group of British film artists to address the uncertainties of the colonial archive as starting point for a critical cinema of cross-cultural dialogue. African American documentarist Louis Massiah succinctly distilled the singularity of their achievement when he observed that:

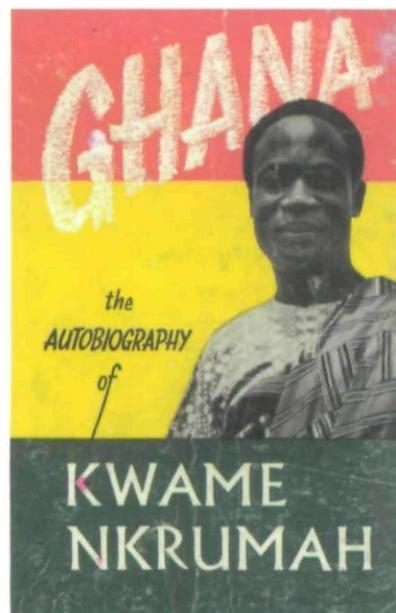
It makes sense that there is a fetishised use of archival material in a growing number of historical documentaries – celluloid or magnetic tape holds images of light reflected off the faces



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of our cultural, political and blood ancestors. One of the great gifts of the films made by Sankofa, Ceddo and Black Audio is to free such documents from the realm of mere images that support a narrative and to use them as objects with the potency of fetish: lovingly, respectfully, and, at times, fearfully, displayed.<sup>5</sup>

Film scholar Laura Marks concurs with this counter-definition of fetishism for she places BAFC at the leading edge of a global trend that created the new genre of 'inter-cultural cinema'. Where 'inter-cultural cinema is not sanguine about finding the truth of a historical event so much as making history reveal what

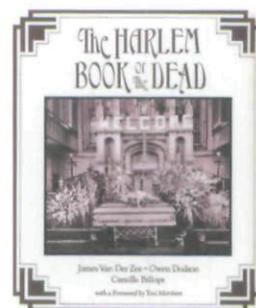


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it has not been able to say',<sup>6</sup> BAFC's poetic handling of the archival element performs a radical transvaluation of the ontology of the image. A diaspora's ancestors are always 'unknown', for diasporas are inaugurated by the primal catastrophe of involuntary separation and an abiding attachment to the enigma of 'origins' becomes a constitutive feature of their cultural formation. Ordinarily a fetish is a substitute for something that is not actually there – a lack. By bringing a range of formalist procedures (such as colour-tinting, differential film speeds and reprinting) to the tender handling of orphaned 'unknowns' from the archive, BAFC's bricolage-epistemology works through the chains of substitutions,

condensations and displacements that encircle the void of such a 'lack' as the *objet-petit* of the post-colonial subject's desire-to-know.

Observing the iconography of the corpse as 'a contemporary corollary to the bones of the ancestors', the critic Kass Banning identified a key marker of post-colonial consciousness, for the corpses found in tableaux moments in *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993) also appear in the Sankofa productions, *Dreaming Rivers* (1988) by Martina Attille and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989).<sup>7</sup> All of these films are imbued with a mournful structure of feeling, but the inexplicable trope of the



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'missing corpse' is an important marker of a struggle over the representation, retrieval and preservation of collective memories: it implies both a responsibility towards the past and a promise made towards the future.

When Akomfrah says, 'I think necrophilia is at the heart of black film-making', his phrase immediately arrests our attention: 'it has to do with getting to the heart of something that is intangible, a memory of ourselves'.<sup>8</sup> Considering that *Testament* originated with 'the question of whether you could make films about intangible things',<sup>9</sup> how might the idea of 'black necrophilia' illuminate the formal structure of the film? Adding that 'I mean

56. Emma Francis Wilson as Danso, Tania Rogers as Abena, *Testament*, 1988

57. Kwame Nkrumah, 1960, *Testament*, 1988

58. *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, 1959

59. *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 1978

necrophilia not in a literal sense, but in a post-modern sense in which people are invoking figures, there is an act of feeding off the dead', Akomfrah's reference to *The Harlem Book of the Dead* – an album of mortuary portraits by the studio photographer James VanDerZee (which was an iconographic source for both *Seven Songs* and for *Looking for Langston*) – touches on the protective aspects of fetishism in diaspora culture's abiding attachment to the enigma of unknown ancestors. 'When you seize hold of these figures,' he says, 'they literally turn to masks and statues in your hand, but when you get over it ... when you're comfortable with that mask, then the desire shifts from melancholia





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to necrophilia almost. You almost begin to desire these figures precisely because they are irretrievable, impossible to capture, therefore dead.<sup>10</sup>

Read in light of Freud's 1917 distinction, the phenomenon of 'black necrophilia' corrupts the clarity of the categories of mourning and melancholia. Both are responses to loss, but where 'mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on',<sup>11</sup> melancholia, in contrast, defines an internal obstacle to the initiation of grief. Whereas mourning begins when the ego accepts its absolute

separation from the lost loved one as a result of death, melancholia involves the ego's refusal to accept the reality of loss, such that the subject remains inwardly attached to the lost loved object and the initiation of grief-work is delayed. Grieving is painful because cherished memories are called up into consciousness and hypercathected by the desire to hold on to what one has lost, while at the same time memories are decathected in light of the demands of reality-testing, which counsels the necessity of letting go.

To understand Abena's journey is to accompany her through the eddies and rapids of this abyssal contraflow. Close attention to three factors – acting,

60. Marxist Leninist pamphlets, *Testament*, 1988

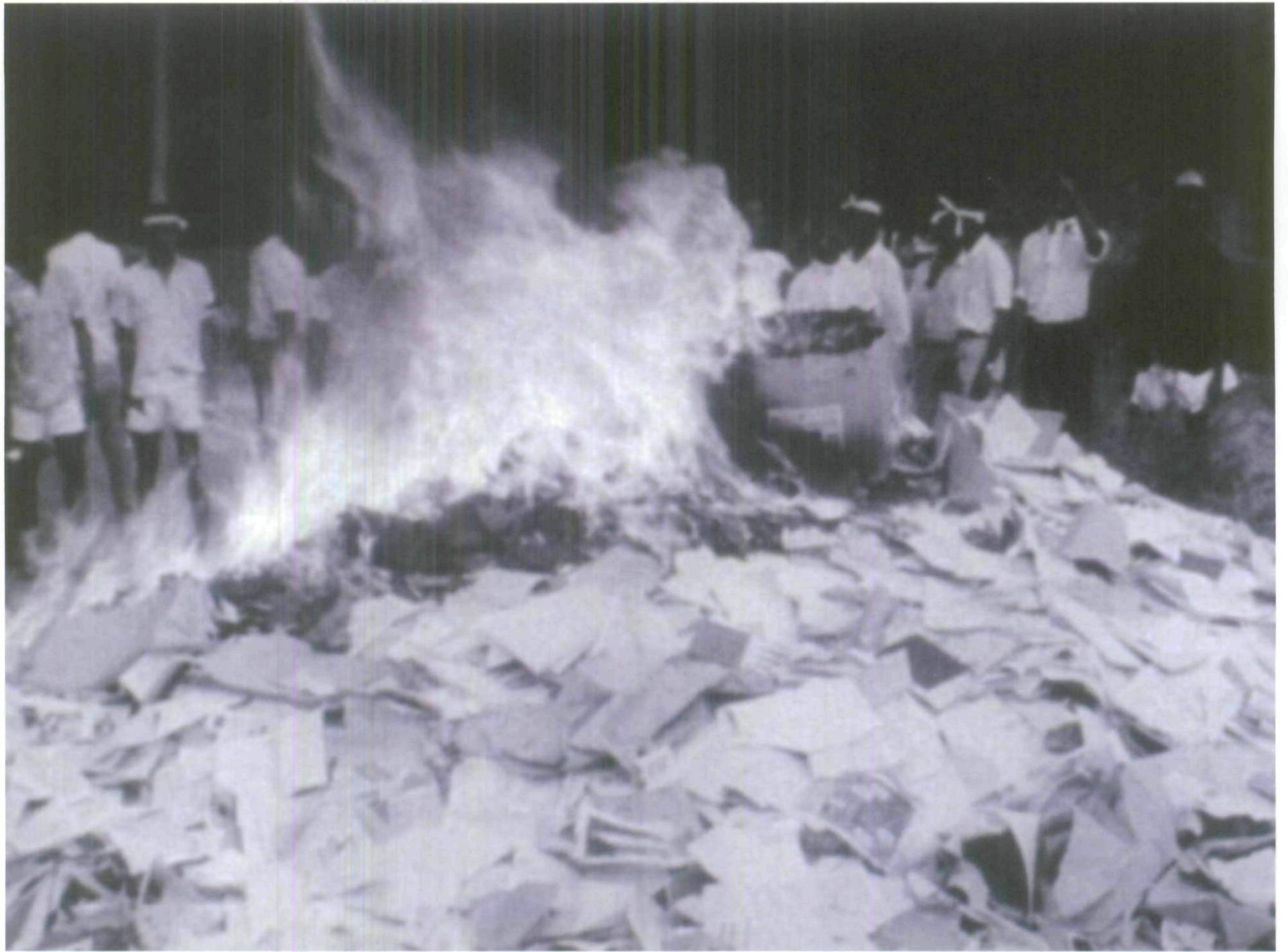
61. Abena betrays her comrades to the Sergeant, Errol Shaker, *Testament*, 1988

intertextuality and authorial voice – shows how the montage structure of *Testament* discloses a 'diagnostic understanding' of the strange phenomenon Freud named as *nachträglichkeit*, or 'deferred action', which lies at the heart of trauma. Akomfrah's thoughts on the fetish-like qualities of the masks and statues that feed off the dead revealingly prompted him to say:

The most powerful moments actually in *Testament*, for me, are the very end and the very beginning, both images really of death, a kind of stultification, atrophy, when she goes to the graveyard at the end and buries her father, or when the man walks in the very

beginning of *Testament*, a wish-fulfillment of death, a drowning-wish going on there. There is a level of morbidity which I think people have to realise in the quest for identity. It is a morbid business.<sup>12</sup>

Obedying the laws of narratology – that the ending should always reply to the beginning – *Testament* also disobeys by starting off with a pre-diegetic 'legend'. Indicating that Nkrumah's C.P.P led the world's first experiment in African socialism, that red, black and blue are colours of mourning, and that rivers are Ga gods of memory, a section of Zbigniew Herbert's poem *Report from the Besieged City* – 'if we lose the ruins,



nothing will be left' – establishes an elegaic tone. An echoing pulse heightens the first pro-filmic image: a fully clothed man, with pipe and straw hat, wades into the Volta River; he submerges, surfaces for air, his hat floats off, he sinks again. In all its sublime surreality, it works emblematically as an image that announces what the next eighty minutes are going to do – the film will plunge viewers and characters alike into the turbulent rivers of memory, an unmasterable realm that offers the promise of renewal as well as the danger of drowning.

*Testament's* opening sections clearly signal a departure from the conventions of the classical realist text and the principled refusal of 'psychological depth' is directly related to the theme of memory-as-trauma, which has the potential to flood the narrative with excessive emotionality when encoded in realist or naturalist modes. To understand the formal structuration of the montage, two key factors must be taken into account. The first concerns official archives in a state of ruin and the 'wall of silence' Akomfrah met in the pre-production process. He recalls: 'when I realised that we couldn't do a straightforward historical account of what happened because of the lack of testimonies, or archives, it became clear to me that we needed a guide'. Describing the improvised genesis of the script,

and the construction of Abena's character as 'a bystander, someone on the sidelines who got swept up by the force of history', he points out that 'the bulk of support for the [C.P.P.] party were women'. 'Another reason I chose a woman character,' he adds,

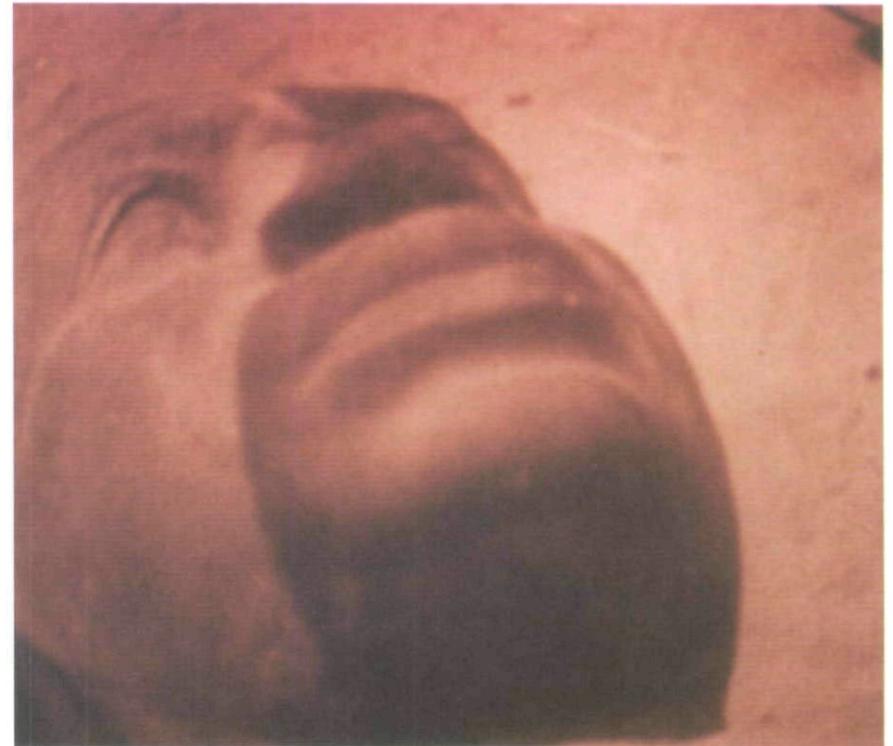
is because it fits my sense of connection with the country. There is a kind of over-identification with feminine figures in the ideas I come up with. If you ask me whether there's a degree of transference onto a feminine figure of what are basically the concerns of a black male film-maker – yes, that's clearly going on.<sup>13</sup>

While an autobiographical voice neither explains the ultimate meaning of the text nor guarantees a psychoanalytic reading, the following words illuminate a strategy of authorship that is all too keenly aware of the potentially 'uncontainable' force of the psychical flows of transference and identification that circulate in the wake of traumatic remembrance:

The film was very much improvised. I'd written out a sketchy scenario: Abena would arrive and try to get in touch with people, but people would not want to know her. She'd be confused, *and as a consequence, people watching the film would be confused.* As the film went on, it would become clear that she had left ... because she had betrayed a number of friends. She was a squealer. And as a

62. A bonfire of Marxist Leninist literature  
*Testament*, 1988

63. Nkrumah statue toppled, *Testament*, 1988



consequence of this her parents died. So Abena had to come back not just to do a report for television, but to see where her parents were buried. That crude schema more or less fit a number of dilemmas I wanted to deal with.<sup>14</sup>

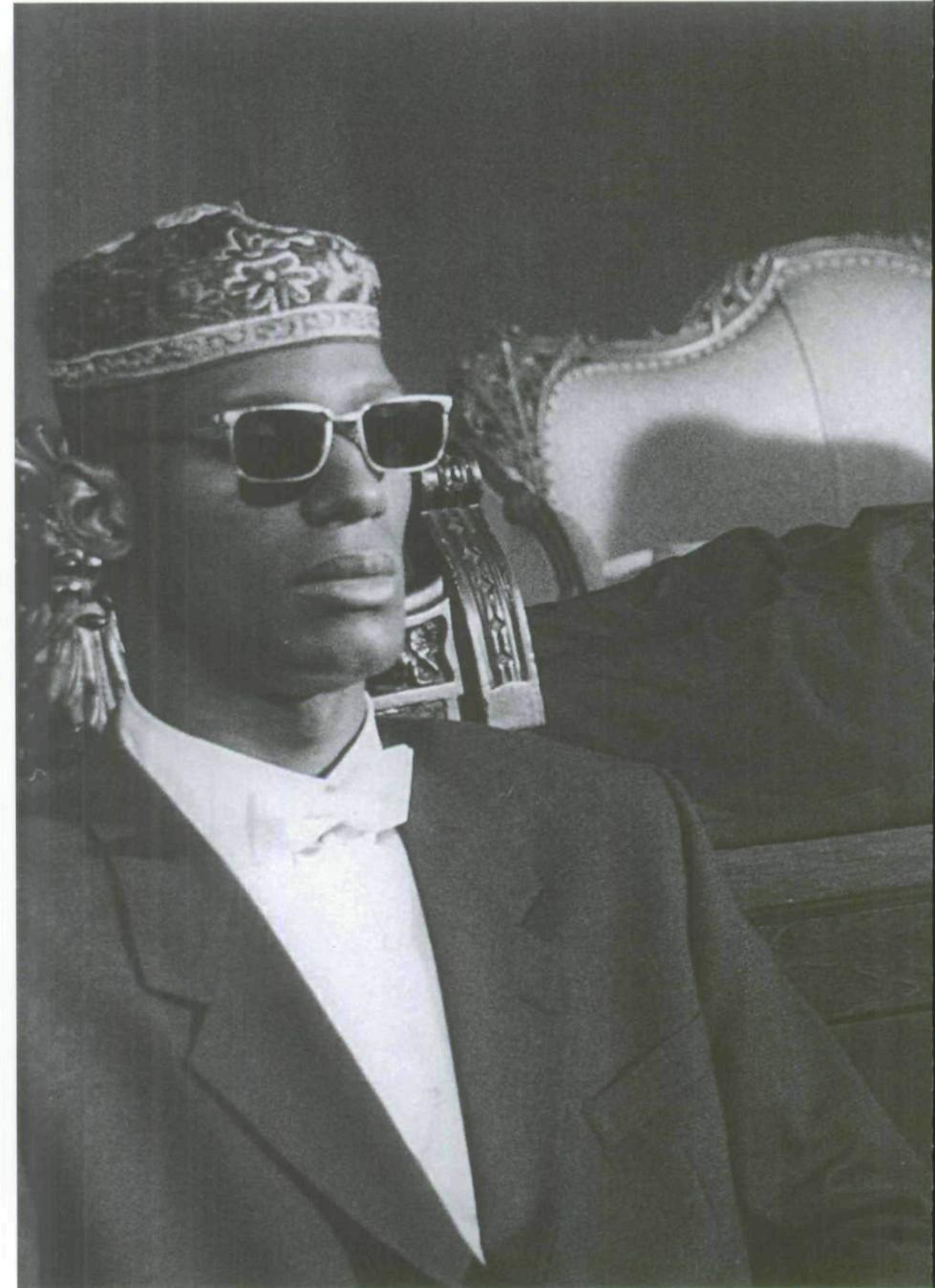
In reaching the cause of Abena's guilt – the betrayal of her comrades – the diegetic schema redoubles it, for the consequences of her actions have caused her own bereavement. The sub-diegetic flash-back sequence revealing her humiliation at the hands of the sergeant who forced her to 'squel' functions as a screen-memory, for 'behind' that trauma lies the even greater trauma of the death of her parents, which makes Abena not only an exile but an orphan.

When we factor in the self-analytical (rather than autobiographical) impetus that Akomfrah reveals in the following passage, we begin to understand how Black Audio Film Collective have responded artistically to the crisis of 'unknowing' that results when mourning cannot be initiated as a consequence of post-colonial trauma:

A lot of what the film addresses is based on my family's history ... Both my parents were involved in politics at the time. They had both been studying in Britain and went back because of the independence movement. In a sense, it became their lives.

When the coup happened in 1966 – my father had died the year before – we basically had nothing. My mother had nothing. Politics was her life and so she decided that the best thing to do was to leave with her four sons. She knew that what usually follows these coups is a period of acrimony and revenge, in which people who were members of the outgoing government are made to pay for their involvement. She suspected that that would happen to her.<sup>15</sup>

Trauma is not a memory but an overwhelming event that was never 'experienced' during its occurrence because the force of the 'shock' incapacitated ego-consciousness. As Cathy Caruth suggests, the survivor's memory is compromised by the *deferred action* that carries the psyche beyond the violence of the traumatic event. The survivor of a car-crash cannot recall what actually happened because during the crash psychical mechanisms of withdrawal, numbing or hypnotic immersion were mobilised to carry the subject through the force of the event as an ego-shattering 'wound'. In turn, because the event has not been 'recorded' in memory's storage system, it roams the unconscious with no fixed abode – trauma literally takes possession of the psyche 'against the will of the one it inhabits'.<sup>16</sup>





64. Scene of Eden No.2, Danny Carter as Elijah Muhammad, Darrick Harris as Malcolm X, Theodore L. Cash as Malcolm X's father, Tricia Rose as Malcolm X's mother, *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993

Aware from the outset that Aristotelian rules of tragedy, mimesis and catharsis were ill-equipped to deal with the twentieth century's traumatic modernities, BAFC examined the 'crisis of unknowing' in *Mysteries of July* (1991), which investigated deaths in police custody to reveal the agony of blocked mourning among bereaved survivors when the factual cause of death is 'buried' and repressed as a state secret. *Testament*, on the other hand, explores the psychic terrain of Abena's repressed grief by way of a 'blank' acting style that provides a necessary alternative to realism by thwarting the possibility of the viewer's over-identification with its protagonist. With her spaced-out demeanour

and slouchy body language, Abena is not a very endearing character: in point of fact, she is not actually a 'character' at all, for the affective disposition that Tania Rodgers communicates through her superb performance – head sinking while she speaks, arms folded on hips, hands clenched as she walks towards camera – subtly redistributes the potential overflow of emotions unleashed by the 'river of memory'. In channelling the viewer's thoughts and feelings away from the narcissistic stasis of over-identification, it gradually becomes clear that the acting is merely one more formal element in the overall montage-combinatory. The depopulated landscape acquires an increasingly dominant role in the film

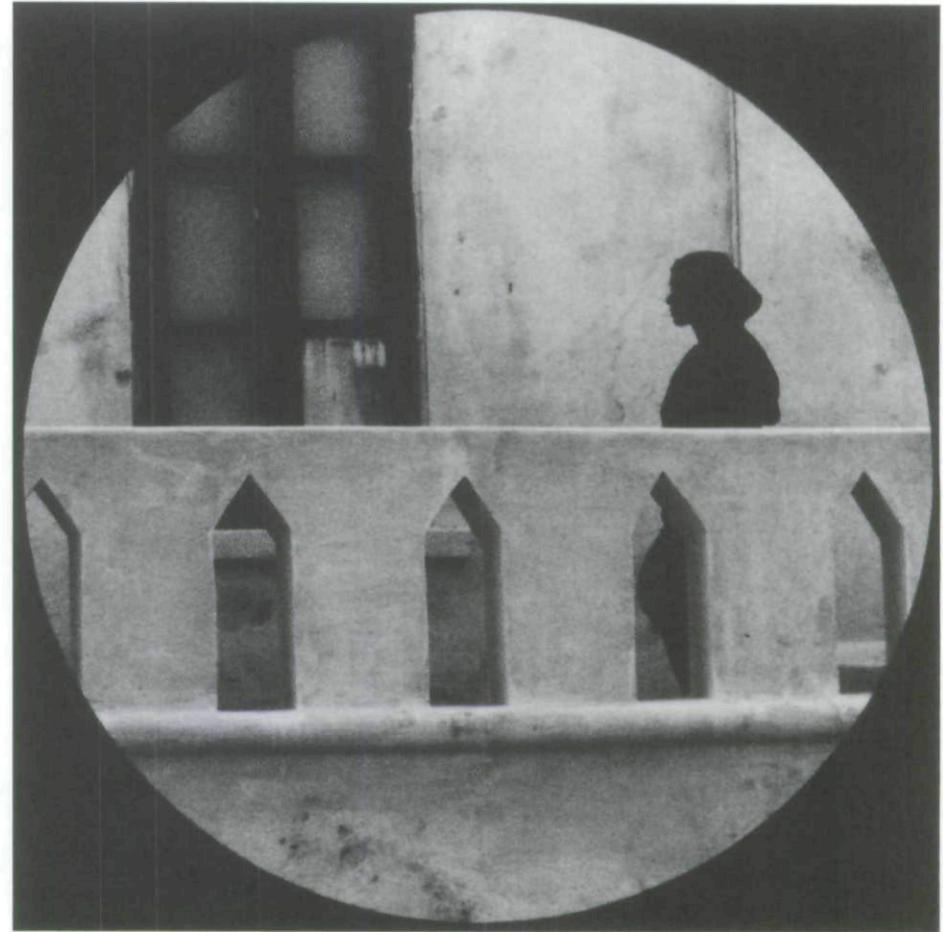


in proportion to the expressive 'depletion' of Abena's character: rather than reflect or absorb her emotions, the landscape becomes just as much a 'character' as she is. A cut-away sequence showing a man canoeing on the Volta River, as he recites a Ga parable, implies that 'the river of memory' is an agent of narrative flow in its own right.

Discussing his chosen authorial influences – Ritwik Ghatak, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky and 'English Brechtian cinema of the 70s' – Akomfrah has said, 'it was very much a conception of cinema as a machinery of movement through which you could explore questions of rhythm, tempo, colour, and so on – very formal questions ... As a method, it is very rigorous and very anti-humanist in a way.'<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when Abena reports that negotiations to interview Herzog have broken down – on the steps of Elmina Castle – *Testament* reveals an unprecedented formal solution to the question of how the 'intangible' realities of post-colonial trauma might be brought into cinematic representation for the first time – by employing intertextuality as a holding environment for the river of memories.

As Abena sits down to talk to Danso in the opening scenes of the diegesis, the parched landscape evokes Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1967) even as the air of lassitude surrounding her flouncy skirt makes her

a dead ringer for Durer's *Melencolia* (1514). It is in the Elmina sequence, however, where we see Akomfrah directing Abena's television crew – in a Godardian moment of self-reflexivity that calls to mind the coastal setting of *Le Mepris* (1965) – that *Testament* discloses its architecture of intertextual quotation as an alternative to realism that also employs allegory as an alternative to symbolism. When the camera soars and glides above the spaces of the castle's fifteenth-century architecture, its apparent weightlessness inscribes a contrapuntal difference from the sheer gravitas of this 'historical' site, which was built in the era of the Portuguese maritime baroque, initially as a way-station in the quest for Prester John (who was believed to govern a Christian kingdom in Central Africa), before it was adapted for the Atlantic slave trade. Based on *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), Bruce Chatwin's novel about a Latin American slave trader in Dahomey, *Cobra Verde* is an object of critique here, for cut-aways to Herzog's film-set show mass-produced skulls serially arranged on a mud wall, as if to recycle primitivist myths of Europe's so-called 'other'. The 'fake testimonies' implied by these predictable simulacra produce a striking contrast with the actual skull that disquiets Abena at the end, where, in Walter Benjamin's words, she has become a woman who has discovered that 'everything about history, that from the beginning, has been untimely,



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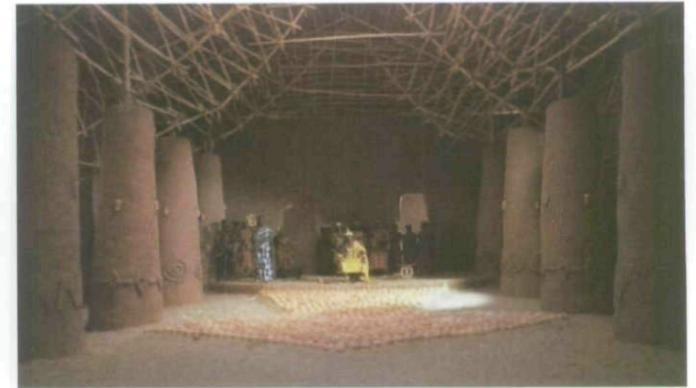
65. Tania Rogers as Abena, *Testament*, 198866. Tania Rogers as Abena, at Elmina Castle, *Testament*, 1988



67



68



69

sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death's head'.<sup>18</sup>

The differentiation produced by the visual contrast between two sorts of skulls is crucial because it cuts between allegory and symbol as distinct registers of inscription. Lacan might say the skull that Abena encounters in the graveyard is neither imaginary nor symbolic but a piece of 'the real' which shows the material remnants of subjectivity's traumatic core. For Benjamin, on the other hand, 'whereas in the symbol destruction is idealised and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted

with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape' – which accurately describes *Testament's* opening scenes. The skull that inexplicably looks back at Abena at the end of the film 'lacks all "symbolic" freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity – nevertheless, this... is at the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline'.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps Abena's 'blankness' is fitting for a ghost, that is to say, a survivor of post-colonial trauma who is both ghost and ghosted, agent and patient, whose subjectivity has been split between first

67–68. Tania Rogers as Abena, *Testament*, 1988

69. *Cobra Verde*, Werner Herzog, 1987

70. Film set of *Cobra Verde*, *Testament*, 1988

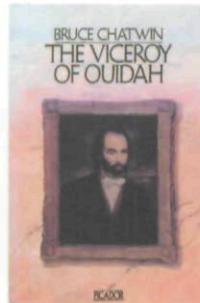
71. Bruce Chatwin, *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, 1980

72. *Nostalghia*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983

73. Krystyna Janda as Agnieszka, *Man of Marble*, 1977



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71

and third person from the start. As the voice-over narrator (Sally Sagoe) introduces Abena through different pronouns – ‘twenty years ago I started running ... Abena was a student at the Nkrumah Ideological Institute’ – the fragments of her psyche, crucified by irreconcilable gaps between past and present, are cradled and ‘held’ by the threnodic beauty of the compositions extracted from Arvo Part’s *Fratres* and Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Magnificat* that we hear on the soundtrack. Immersed in the rivers of memory, as newsreels tinted yellow and orange show the ebb and flow of political arrests and detentions ‘like the tide’, the Jamestown Dirge Singers

(who are professional mourners, as in Shakespearean Europe) form a semiotic chora to Abena’s remorseful utterance, ‘in 1966 I believed two bodies could be one’, which accompanies an inexplicable super-8 image of conjoined twins.

Portrayed in traditional funeral attire on the prow of a boat, Abena reveals herself as a ‘quantum ghost’, in the words of Wilson Harris.<sup>20</sup> Her journey crosses the ‘living cross-culturalities’ of an aquatic realm in which ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ are not opposed (as in Herzog’s plastic clichés) but intermesh within an intertextual space of allegory that Christine Buci-Glucksmann refers to as ‘post-modern baroque’.<sup>21</sup> *Testament*’s purposively de-



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saturated rendition of the Ghanaian landscape alludes to Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia* (1983), in which variations in ‘colour temperature’ correspond to emotional motivation rather than realist logic, and in which elements such as fire and water are as much ‘characters’ as the actors. Above all, where Tarkovsky explored the dilemma of a Russian translator exiled in Italy, *Testament*’s plotline also alludes to the ‘revolutionary nostalgia’ of Andrzej Wajda’s *Man of Marble* (1977) for Abena is twin-sister-in-reverse to Agnieszka, the chain-smoking film student protagonist who uncovers archival material of a 1950s propaganda hero and is pressured to ‘revise’ her story by the communist state.

Although Wajda’s hectic *verité* style could not be more different, the baroque intertextual architecture that enriches *Testament*’s elliptical form produces a universalist understanding of traumatic modernity not by a frontal equivalence with the repressions wrought upon Central Europe by Soviet imperialism, but by making the ‘unspeakable’ aspects of Africa’s traumatised post-colonial condition tangible through a lattice-work of metonymic implication.

Where Abena’s flash-backs form a silver thread in the diegetic binding, they reveal that ‘the phantom is ... a metapsychological fact’, for ‘what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets



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of others'.<sup>22</sup> Tinted by an indigo filter that converts day to night, this thread reveals the sergeant as Abena's 'bad father' – like a screen-memory, he is the phantom who blocks her recognition of the 'lost parent' who lies behind the public shame she felt as a squealer. However, when Abena returns to the amber twilight of the densely wooded graveyard at the end – having recounted to Danso the childhood terror provoked by a hole in the grounds of her family home – *Testament* reveals the golden thread through which the film bares its soul as post-colonial *trauerspiel*, or sorrow song. This concluding image of the skull retroactively codifies her earlier graveyard visit as a hallucinatory wish-fulfilment – where Abena 'saw' two

shadowy figures throwing rocks into a hole in the ground (in the film's sole utilisation of point-of-view).

When John Akomfrah says, 'My father was buried in Ghana. I hadn't seen his grave but I wanted to',<sup>23</sup> we must understand that the manifest film-strip does not actually contain a scene in which 'she goes to the graveyard and buries her father'<sup>24</sup> because all we actually see is Abena looking at a skull as she catches her breath at the end. Giving us the diegetic signified that is produced as a result of the *nachtraglichkeit* of the montage's signifying 'work', and not otherwise shown or made visible, these words crystallise the dread power of BAFC's tender handling



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of metonymic implication. Immersed in ego-shattering memories that must be simultaneously hypercathected and decathected, held onto and let go of, Abena survives the travails of the river of memory for almost eighty minutes only to find that she must now initiate her grief and begin mourning *for the very first time*.

Once the tag-line from *Handsworth Songs* is abbreviated slightly – 'there are no stories ... only the ghosts of other stories' – we find the hermeneutic key to the practice of intertextuality that informs the Black Audio montage-principle as a whole. Just as the central 'character' of *Who Needs a Heart* (1993) – Michael X – is visually absent, and made

74. Abena approaches ruins of Nkrumah Ideological Institute, *Testament*, 1988

75. Albrecht Durer, *Melencolia*, 1514

76. Tania Rogers, Edward George, Evans Francis, John Akomfrah, on set, *Testament*, 1988

present only through his effects on others, this lattice-work of metonymic implication moves towards the 'unrepresentable' by evoking the cyclical forms of the sorrow song that provides a holding environment in which unbearably painful stories can be made socially sharable for the very first time.

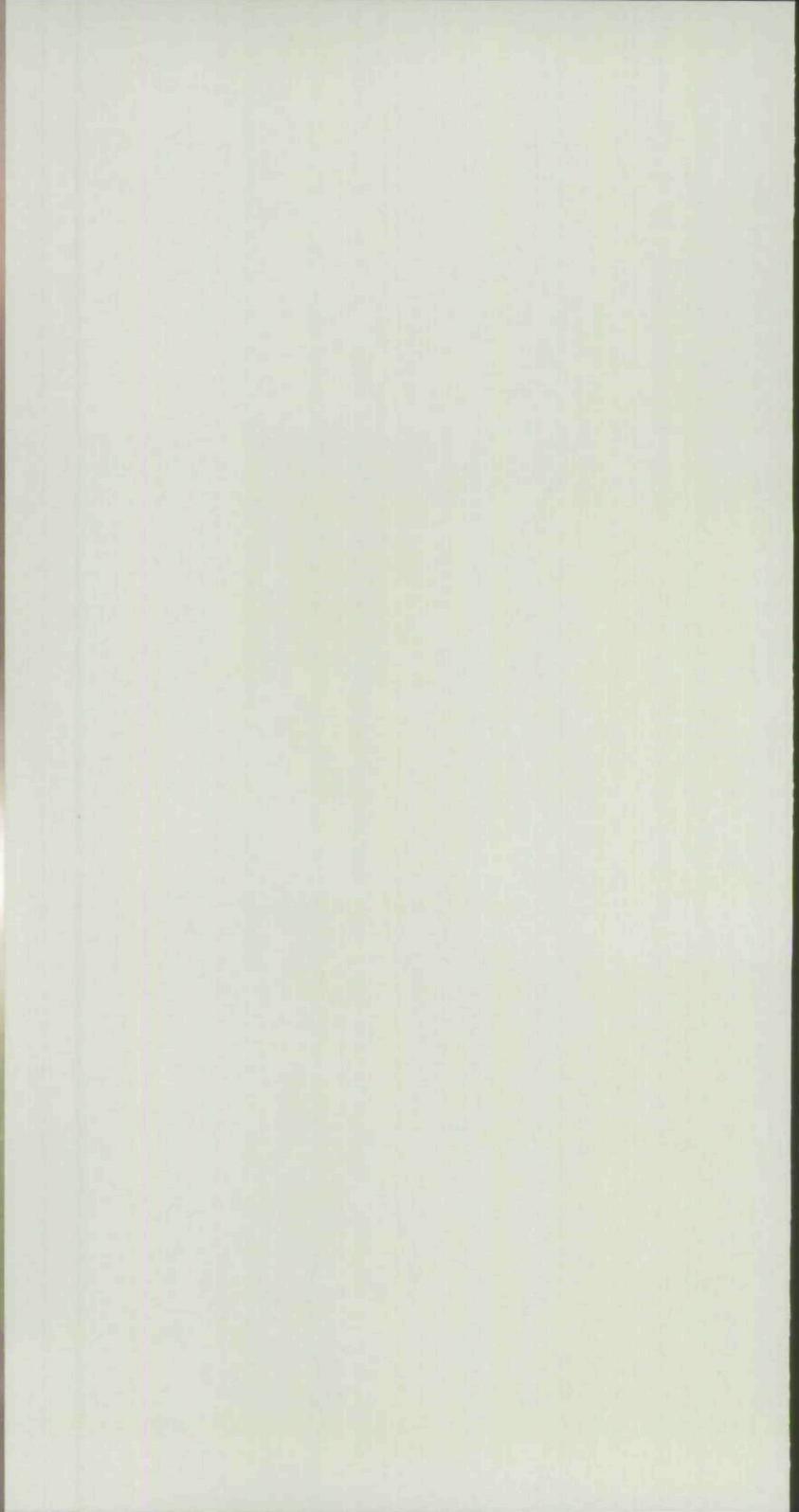
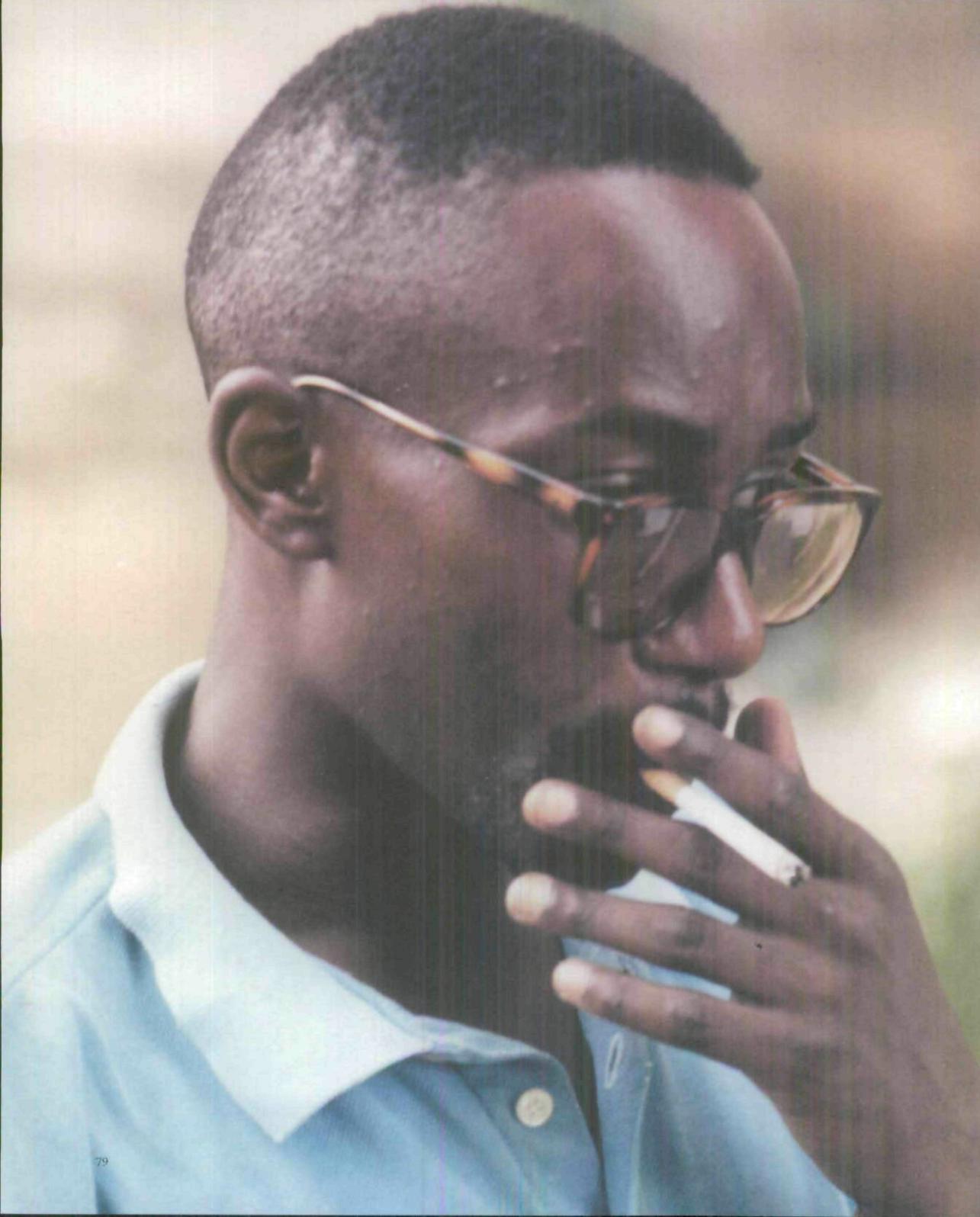
## Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* [1973], London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 88.
2. John Akomfrah in Thomas Allen Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora: An Interview with John Akomfrah', *Afterimage*, April 1992, p. 10.
3. Ibid.
4. D. W. Winnicott, *Holding and Interpretation: Fragment of an Analysis* [1972], New York: Grove Press, 1986.
5. Louis Massiah, 'Using Archives', *Black Film Bulletin*, 3/4, autumn/winter 1993/94, p. 27.
6. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
7. Kass Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead: Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary – An Interview with John Akomfrah', *Border/Lines*, 29/30, 1993, pp. 28–38.
8. Ibid., p. 33.
9. Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora', p. 11.
10. Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead', p. 33.
11. Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1917], in *On Metapsychology* (Pelican Freud Library vol. 11), London: Penguin, 1984, p. 252.
12. Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead', p. 33.
13. Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora', p. 11.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 5.
17. Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora', p. 11.
18. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1928], London: Verso, 1998, p. 166.
19. Ibid.
20. See Nathaniel Mackey, 'Quantum Ghosts: An Interview with Wilson Harris', in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction*, London and Massachusetts: INIVA/MIT, 2006, pp. 206–201.
21. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity* [1984], London: Sage/Theory, Culture & Society, 1994.
22. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, 'Notes on the Phantom – A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology' [1975], in *The Shell and the Kernel*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 171.
23. Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora', p. 11.
24. Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead', p. 33.















TESTAMENT

SUN MAT

THUR

MISSISSIPPI

BURNING IN ADVERTISING

SAT

THE BIG BLUE

ALL NIGHT

LATES

FR

HOW TO GET AHEAD

MISSISSIPPI

SAT

THE BIG BLUE

ALL NIGHT

RITZY

CINEMA

The war zone of memories



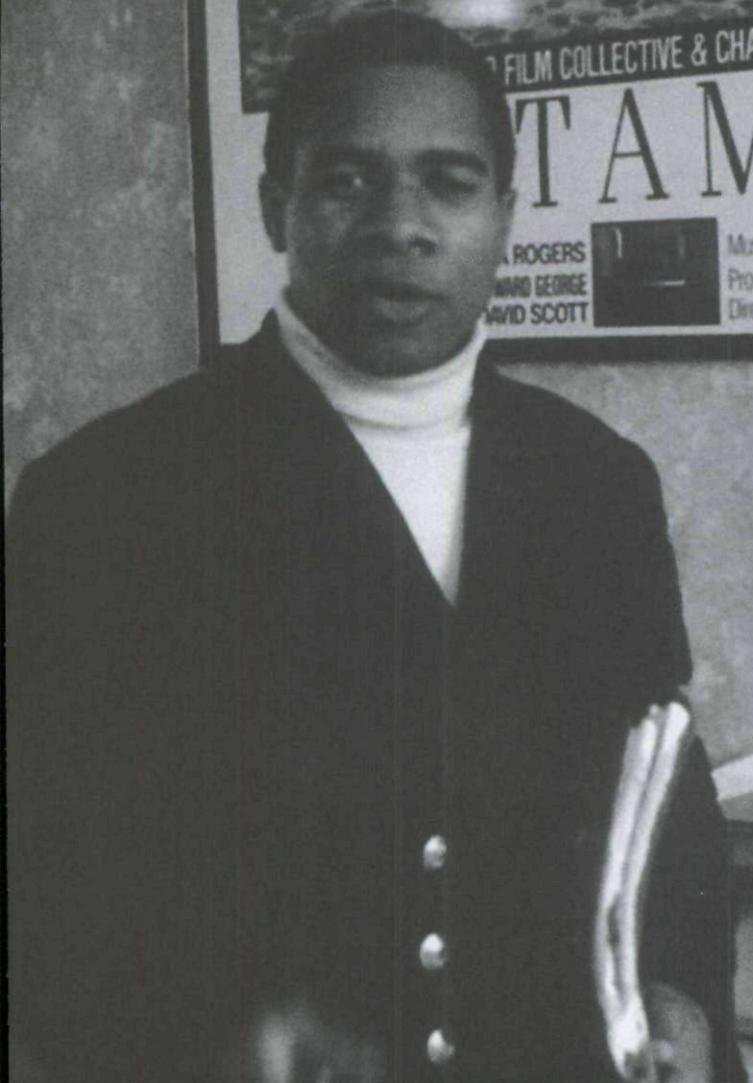
FILM COLLECTIVE & CHANNEL FOUR PRESENTS

# TAMMENT

ROGERS  
WARD GEORGE  
DAVID SCOTT

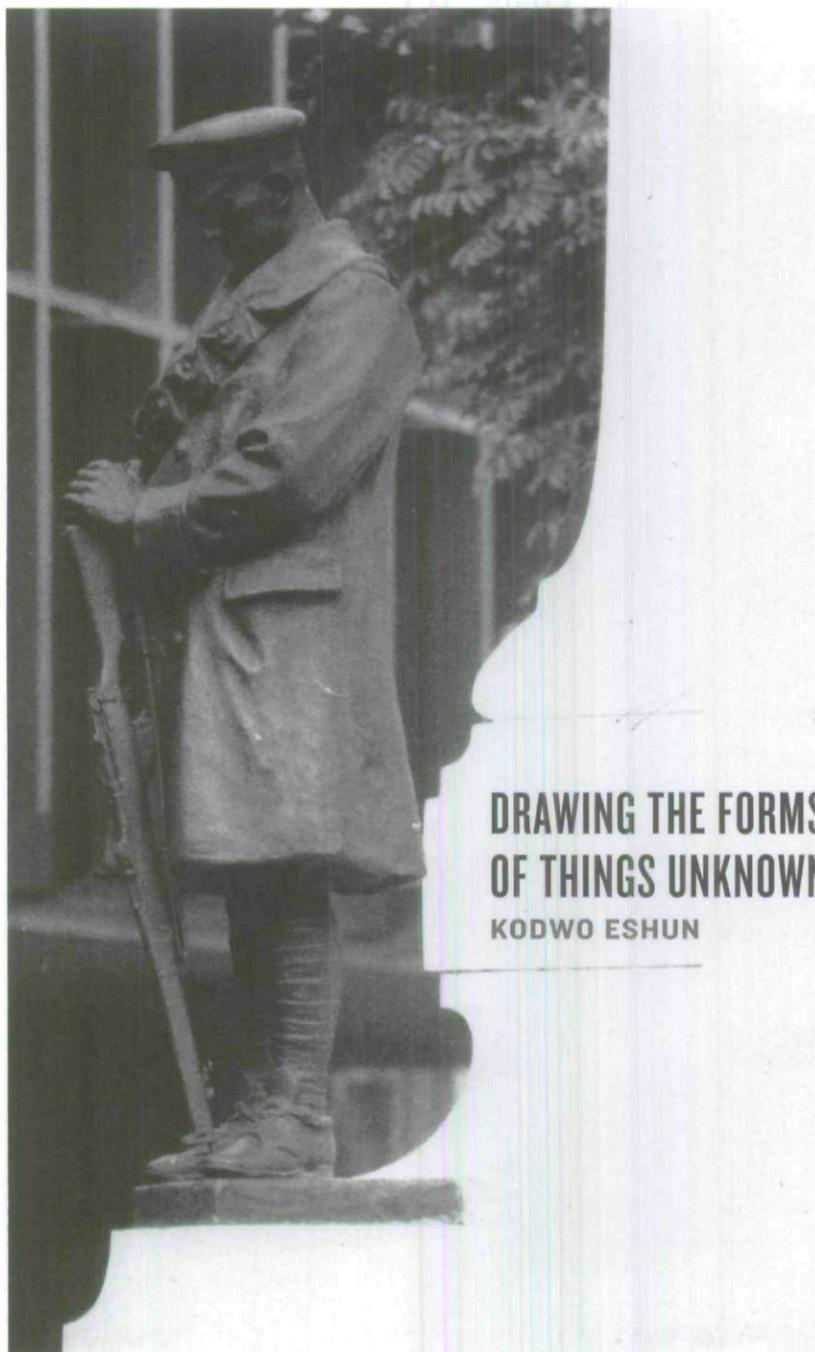


Music: TREVOR MATHISON Editor: BRAND THUMIM  
Producers: AVRIL JOHNSON & LINA GOPAUL  
Director: JOHN AKOMFRAH



77. Emma Francis Wilson, Tania Rogers, *Testament*, 1988
78. Edward George, *Testament*, 1988
79. Trevor Mathison, *Testament*, 1988
80. Lina Gopaul, *Testament*, 1988
81. Avril Johnson, *Testament*, 1988
82. John Akomfrah, *Testament*, 1988
83. *Testament*, Ritzy Cinema, Brixton, London, 1989
84. David Lawson, Ridley Road, 1989
85. Reece Auguiste, Ridley Road, 1989





**DRAWING THE FORMS  
OF THINGS UNKNOWN**  
KODWO ESHUN

*They strike one above all as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use; to this inarticulate state they probably form, collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments...*

Henry James<sup>1</sup>

**I. In the beginning, a rupture...**

*the archive... begins with the outside of our own language... it deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history.*

Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

What account of the artistic practice of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) founded in 1982 and dissolved in 1998 by John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguiste, Avril Johnson, Trevor Mathison, Edward George, David Lawson<sup>3</sup> and Clare Joseph might emerge if the group were understood to be engaged in the inauguration of an aesthetic project? Such an account implies but exceeds the desire to restore agency to their practice; it emphasises the Collective's art as a reflexive inquiry into the potentiality of the aesthetic as such. This essay argues that the Collective's project can be rethought as just such an inquiry; it argues further that this kind of investigation into the potential forms of the aesthetic is distinct from the demand for access to media and from demands

for representation. Black Audio certainly made such demands but their singularity lies, this essay argues, in the related but distinctive decision to inaugurate themselves as an artist-group. By doing so, the Collective bestowed an authority upon themselves that resided precisely in laying claim to the right to theorise the forms an aesthetic might take in the future.

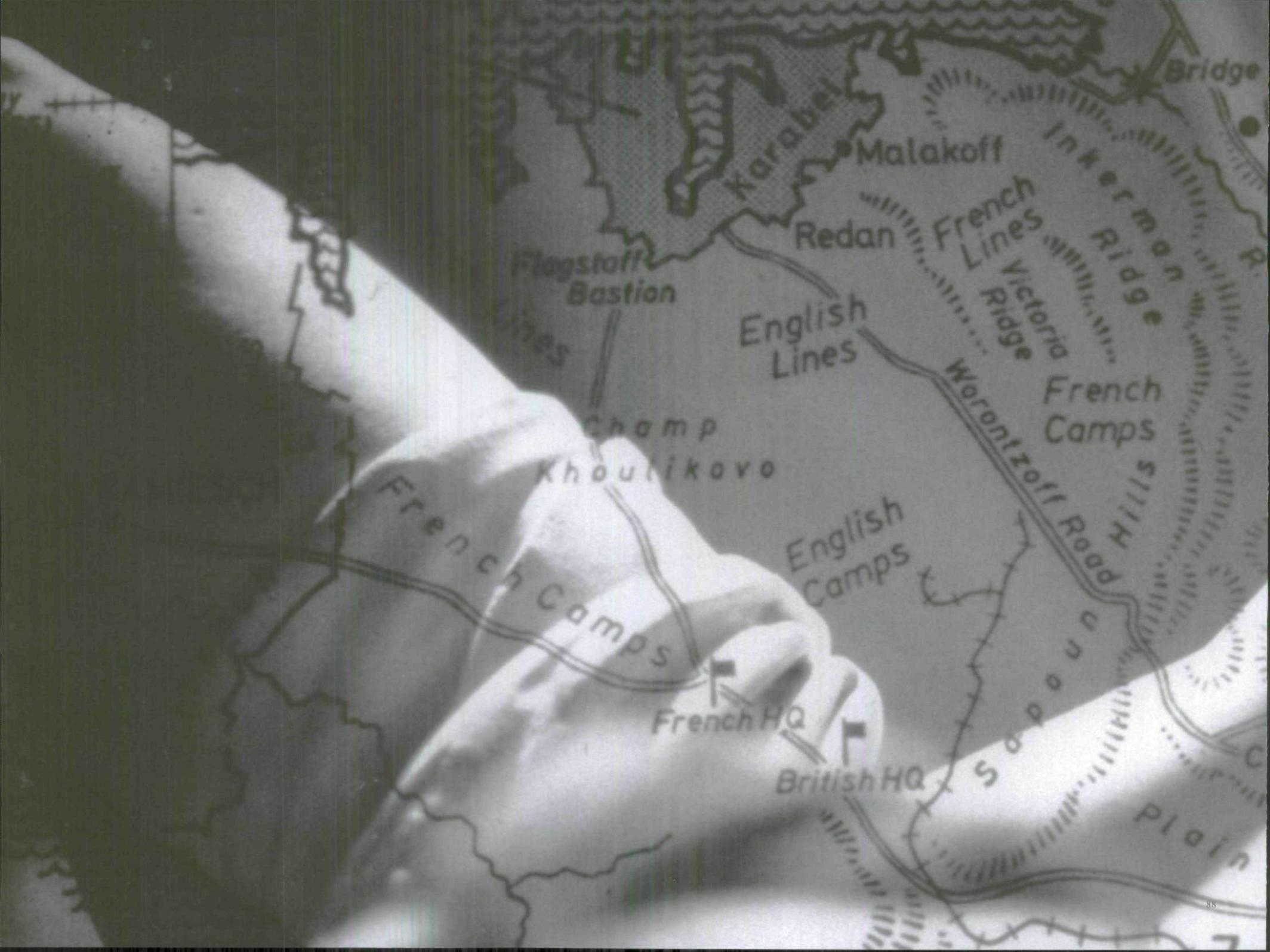
It is this insistence upon invention in the name of a community to come that this essay explores by tracing the implications of self-inauguration. It therefore distinguishes itself from critical accounts that understand the group's work entirely as a response to mediations of social crisis. Such interpretations inadvertently contain art as a reaction to hegemonic media; more sophisticated readings see the work as a retort to the counter-hegemonic media of activist documentary as much as to the genres of television documentary.<sup>4</sup> Both versions nonetheless understood the art of BAFC as a restitutive project that is valuable in so far as it corrects a false consensus. These well-meaning analyses find themselves unable to account for the will to aestheticise that is central to any artistic project; in the case of the Collective, this imperative was more radical still in that the project of inauguration cannot be entirely explained as an act of resistance. On the contrary, inauguration is a sovereign practice; it is unreasonable and necessarily



so. BAFC saw themselves, and were received, internationally, as Baudelairian figures, fully immersed within a contemporary milieu stripped of consolation and security. They accepted and engaged with the multiple collapses of industrialism, Labourism and modernism, with the end of political automatism and racial collectivity outlined by Andre Gorz<sup>5</sup> and Stuart Hall. To view their images and listen to their sounds was to encounter a thrilling ontological insecurity. Akomfrah summed up the mood when he declared that 'We're not in church anymore. Sunday is over.'<sup>6</sup> This was BAFC code for New Times, for an art in which post-colonial subjectivities could no longer be framed as a minority in need of protection from the death of God through theology, in need of shelter from European thought by recourse to an ancestral Africanity, in need of sanctuary from the disenchantments of modernity.

In interviews, photographs and in person, the group projected a stance of high seriousness combined with a seductive stylishness. Their attitude was a statement of British Afrodiasporic internationalism, enacted through a specific sense of generational self-entitlement. Akomfrah's family background was Ghanaian and Nigerian, Lawson's was Ghanaian, Togolese and Trinidadian, Gopaul, Johnson

and Mathison's was Jamaican, while Auguste and George's was Dominican. This biographical heterogeneity informed the Collective's consciousness in complex ways. It fed into the self-awareness of the group as a neo-Gramscian project in itself. At the core of this project was the desire to enquire into the condition of the present that each artist inhabited 'as the sum of the historical process to date'.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Donald Rodney, Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers and Marlene Smith of the BLK Art Group, whom they knew well,<sup>8</sup> the Collective's work evoked a persistent agnosticism towards the forms of certainty that audiences and artists felt about the racialisation of their lives. The 'Black' in Black Audio Film Collective was not informed by the kinds of identification with post-war Pan-Africanism and the 1960s Black Arts Movement favoured by the BLK Art Group;<sup>9</sup> the Collective distanced itself from the ancestralist imperative invoked by film-makers such as Menelik Shabazz; it remained unconvinced and sceptical of the leftist faith in working-class black youth as a potential agent of revolution. Nonetheless, it would not be accurate to say that BAFC prefigured the artistic belief in post-blackness articulated by Thelma Golden.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the condition of raciality invoked by their name might be profitably understood as a question of the unthought, as a dimension of potentiality.



Bridge

Karabel

Malakoff

Inkerman Ridge

Redan

French Lines

Victoria Ridge

Flagstaff Bastion

English Lines

Worontzoff Road

French Camps

Champ

Khoulikovo

English Camps

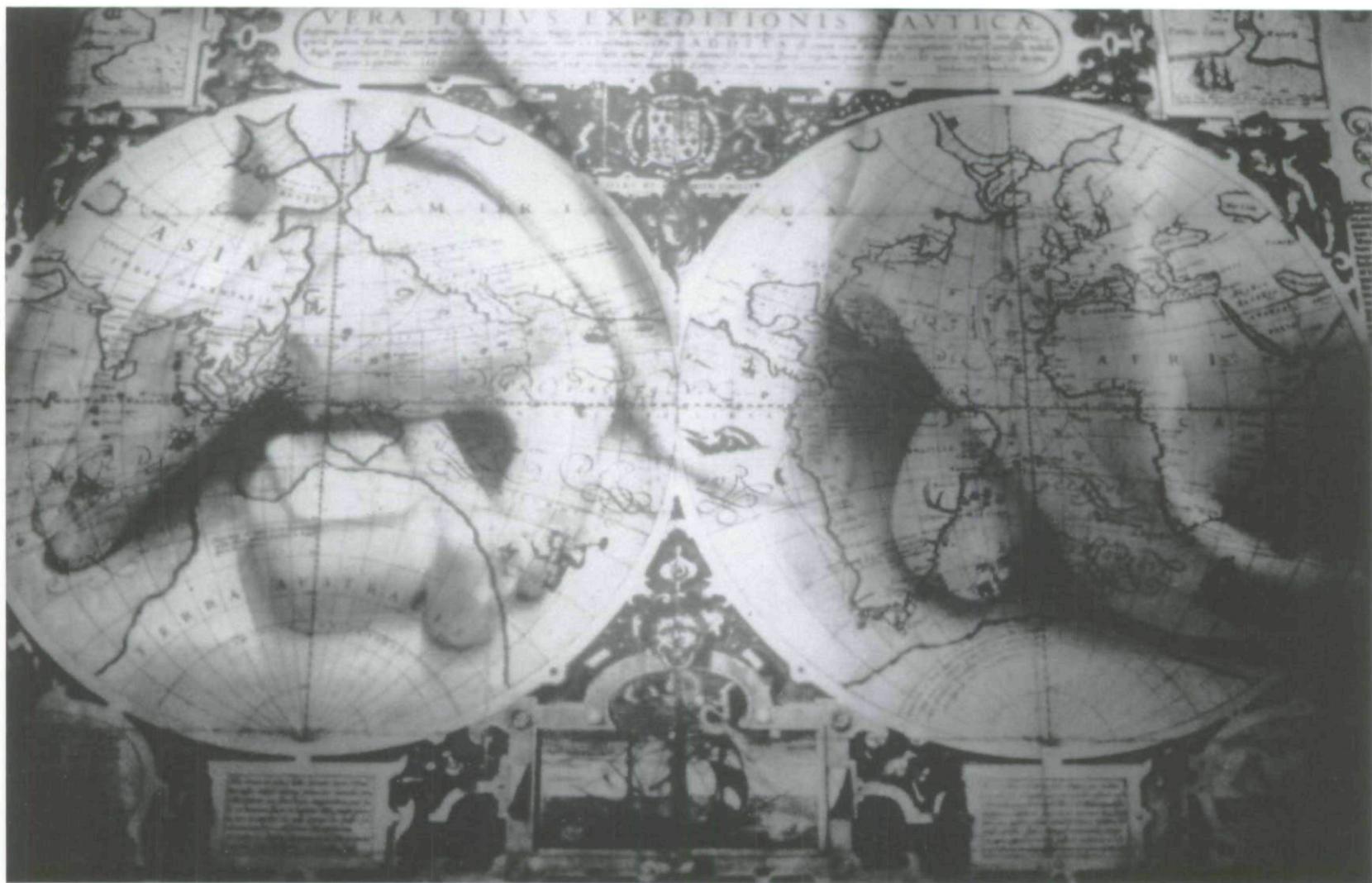
French Camps

Sapoun Hills

French HQ

British HQ

Sapoun Plain



'What I always liked about the term black film-maker was... the way it gave you the impression of a terra incognita, unknown territory, unknown quantity,' declared Akomfrah.<sup>11</sup> Given this sense of potentiality, the concept-metaphor of blackness could be understood in a Gramscian sense as 'an infinity of traces without... an inventory'. The work of BAFC, across sixteen years, constituted just such an inventory<sup>12</sup> of engagements with race as a 'figure of cinematic speech'.<sup>13</sup> Through this complex notion of cineasthetics, the group were able to navigate and negotiate questions of culture and politics in the context of an English political landscape convulsed by civil disturbances throughout 1978, 1980, 1981 and 1985.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. An infinity of traces

*The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.*

Antonio Gramsci<sup>15</sup>

*What else is the history of a country but the vastest narrative surface of all? Not one story but many stories.*

Gabi Teichert, *The Patriot*<sup>16</sup>

Unlike previous generations of Afrodiasporic film-makers, Akomfrah noted that it was 'theory' that provided an entry point into film-making for

the Collective.<sup>17</sup> The group's sense of entitlement to and familiarity with the fields of Althusserian Marxism, Foucauldian archaeology and Lacanian psychoanalysis as formulated in film journals such as *Screen*, *Camera Obscura* and *Framework* informed their formulation of a cinema of ideas whose high seriousness disconcerted multiple demands for a vernacular mode of address. The group displaced such prescriptive expectations via the Foucauldian concept of the 'regime of truth' which they linked to the notion of the 'absence of ruins' drawn from the poetry of Derek Walcott and Zbigniew Herbert<sup>18</sup> and the criticism of novelist Wilson Harris. These ideas fed into the master concept of 'representation'. Aesthetically speaking, representation allowed an interruption and suspension of the inherited conventions of the autonomous image, thereby opening a space for the emergence of what Laura Mulvey called 'an alternative aesthetic'.<sup>19</sup> What the Collective brought to this context was an interest in the formal implications of race as figuration and as knowledge production that would, as Akomfrah put it, 'simultaneously call upon and fiercely rebuke notions of location, ethnicity and identity as a priori certainties'<sup>20</sup> and retrace the 'meanings and minutiae' by which, in George's words, 'the violent nonsensicality of race' was 'made reasonable'.<sup>21</sup>

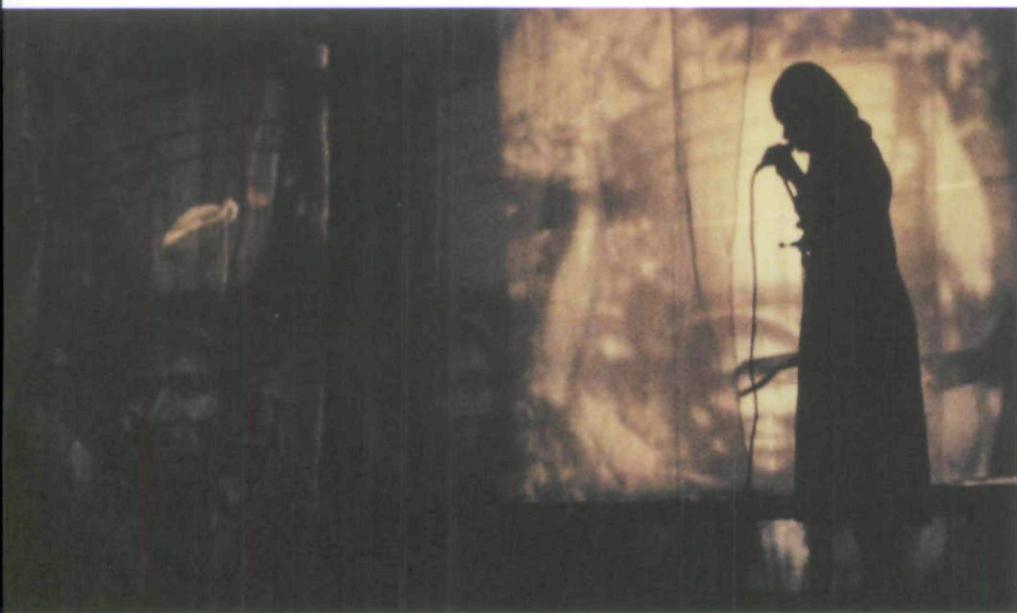


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- 86. Photographic Test, *Expeditions*, 1982
- World War 1 Memorial, Euston Station
- 87. Photographic Test, *Expeditions*, 1982
- 88–89. *Images of Nationality*, 1982–84
- 90. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 1947
- 91. Hannelore Hoger as Gabi Teichert, *The Patriot*, Alexander Kluge, 1979
- 92. Clare Joseph, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, Audiovisual presentation, Portsmouth Polytechnic, 1982
- 93. Jah Shaka, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986



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In 1982, BAFC, then undergraduates at Portsmouth Polytechnic, presented their first work: a tape-slide performance developed from an engagement with anticolonial surrealist Aimé Césaire's prose poem *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1947) in the Student Union Refectory.<sup>22</sup> The space was demarcated by eight muslin sheets suspended from the ceiling; Trevor Mathison operated the Kodak carousel and the projector which beamed 35mm slide images<sup>23</sup> onto and through the muslin sheets while George, Joseph and Akomfrah recited sections from *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* into microphones; these readings were amplified through three sets of loudspeakers. In this first project, the

concerns of the group were already apparent: the interest in the projected image, in the archival image, in the aesthetic of the palimpsest, in immersion within the aural dimension of amplification and modulation. It is important to note that by 1982, the group had already constituted itself as a cooperative under the rules of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM), a full four and a half years before they became fully franchised as a film workshop in 1986.<sup>24</sup> Their formation in the British cooperative movement offers a hint as to their longevity and indicates their distinctiveness from the workshop groups of the era with which they are habitually associated. The formal preoccupations



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of *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land* were elaborated in their second project, *Expeditions*, the group's monumental two-part 60-minute slide-tape text. *Expeditions One*, initially entitled *Empire of Signs*, after Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* (1970), eventually became *Signs of Empire* while *Expeditions Two* was entitled *Images of Nationality*. Produced between 1982 and 1984, *Expeditions* was presented as an audiovisual performance choreographed on Kodak tape-slide dissolve units throughout November 1984 to June 1985.

### 3. Towards an epic constructionism

*The exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold.*

Gaston Bachelard<sup>25</sup>

*In order to educate man to a new longing, everyday familiar objects must be shown to him with totally unexpected perspectives and in unexpected situations.*

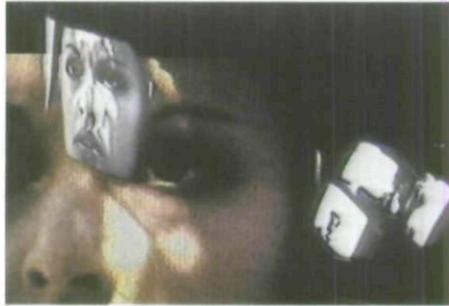
Aleksandr Rodchenko<sup>26</sup>

*Expeditions* deliberately heightened contemporary fears that Britain had produced a 'surplus mutant population' which had 'no roots, no connectedness, to home, elsewhere or here'.<sup>27</sup> It looped a recording of the conservative British lawyer Sir Ronald Bell, QC, admitting on *Panorama*<sup>28</sup> that 'If you look at their faces... I think they don't know who they are or what they are. And really, what you're asking me is how the hell one gives them the sense of belonging' into a mantra

94. Cabaret Voltaire, *Seconds too Late*, 1982

95. Test Dept., *Total State Machine*, 1984

96. Karen Knorr, *The Art of Living at the Cost of Others*, 1984



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that amplified the incapacity of authority to locate subjects whose very presence constituted an irksome reminder of post-imperial malaise. In the law's unease at these all too visible yet somehow unaccountable not-quite citizens, BAFC heard an echo, replayed across the decades, of Lord Frederick Lugard's statement that his subjects 'cannot know who they are or what they are'.<sup>29</sup> 'We had sat through minimal, repetitive music', said Mathison, 'and we wanted that pressure, that grinding relentlessness for our work.'<sup>30</sup> Within the spectral temporality of the tape loop, the imperial anxieties of the early twentieth century resonated with the multiple fears of the present. *Expeditions* experimented with

ways in which sonic process might offer alternative aesthetics for the art space. Its mood of dread stemmed from the group's combination of three distinct methods of musical composition: 'roots' reggae epitomised in the work of Rastafarian selector and producer Jah Shaka,<sup>31</sup> the 'reverberant yet claustrophobic' industrial mantras of Sheffield trio Cabaret Voltaire and the neo-Constructivist anthems of South London's Test Department. During his soundsystem dances, Shaka reworked reggae records into musical prayers of eschatological dread while Cabaret Voltaire and Test Department staged their music in multimedia performances that hymned the discomfiting interregnum

between the end of the industrial age and the dawn of a post-industrial society of control.<sup>32</sup>

Like Karen Knorr's photowork *The Art of Living at the Cost of Others* (1984), *Expeditions* belonged to the postmodernist moment of appropriation of neoclassical imagery and text; the latter was used to 'denaturalise' the transparency<sup>33</sup> of the image. At the hands of British appropriationists such as Victor Burgin, Mary Kelley, Karen Knorr, Olivier Richon and Mitra Tabrizian, semiotic and psychoanalytic writing translated into an aesthetic of refined scriptovisuality. The Collective's approach, by contrast, was not reductive as much

as it was palimpsestual. Each slide in *Expeditions* consisted of transparent gels layered by hand during all-night sessions. Standing at long tables, each artist would layer a gel, then pass it on to the next person who would add or subtract another gel until all were satisfied with the result. What emerged were images of photographs of imperial maps and statues projected upon drapery or onto hands or arms that were then rephotographed and combined with details from high colonial portraiture, children's books, colonial postcards and imperial statuary. Each slide was complete when Letraset letters in cursive fonts were overlaid to construct sequences of text that read as narrative blocks.

97. Victor Burgin, *Today is the Tomorrow You Were Promised Yesterday*, 1976

98. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pioneer Girl*, 1930

99. Anti-Racist Film Programme, 1984

100. *Looking Black*, Poster, 1985

Design: Edward George



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Most appropriationists preferred to use frontal framing; the Collective, by contrast, worked with angular kinds of framing that harked back to the 1920s photography of Aleksandr Rodchenko. In Rodchenko's series of Pioneer photographs such as *Pioneer Girl* (1930) the 'steep low viewpoint' of the frame abstracted the face of Communist youth into 'a group of foreshortened masses' that lent the figure 'a certain monumentality'.<sup>34</sup> BAFC were fascinated by what Mathison called the 'dynamism' of Rodchenko's frame. The sense of 'sky and space' in Constructivist photography offered one source for the aesthetic of 'epic construction' discernible throughout the Collective's work. At the core

of what Akomfrah called epic construction lay the desire to elevate Afrodiasporic subjectivity by imbuing figuration with a gravitas hitherto unimaginable in cultural production. To produce a formal language that could monumentalise Afrodiasporic presence within the frame, the Collective embarked upon a sustained engagement with privileged instances from the archives of still photography from Rodchenko in *Expeditions* to Vanley Burke in *Handsworth Songs* (1986), from Rotimi Fani-Kayode in *Twilight City* (1989) to James VanDerZee in *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993). Their encounters with the still image were mediated by what George called 'moments of stolen solitude and hard

won reflection'.<sup>35</sup> During interviews Akomfrah, Auguste and George reiterated the importance of spaces of intimacy and quietness for their work. What emerged was a paradoxical condition of intimate immensity<sup>36</sup> that was deemed capable of evoking the elusiveness, opacity and complexity of Afrodiasporic becoming.

#### 4. A community to come

*I-den-ti-ty, is the crisis, Can't you see?*<sup>37</sup>  
X-Ray Spex, 'Identity'

The Collective considered *Expeditions* an artwork for exhibition within art schools such as St Martins and art spaces such as the Whitechapel Gallery; at the same time, it was presented within a cinecultural

milieu that shared the ambitions of the post-punk music scene. Independent cinemas and workshops such as the London Film Makers Co-operative in Gloucester Avenue, the Rio Cinema in Dalston, the Four Corners Film and Video Workshop in Mile End and the Other Cinema in Wardour Street functioned as 'political spaces for the showing of radical films and discussion'<sup>38</sup> and 'socially conceptualised audio-visual work'.<sup>39</sup> The expanded definition of cinema as 'social practice' or as 'integrated practice' of the era intersected with the municipal anti-racist campaigns initiated by the radical Labour Greater London Council of May 1981 to March 1986. From 1983 to 1985, the Collective pursued a radical



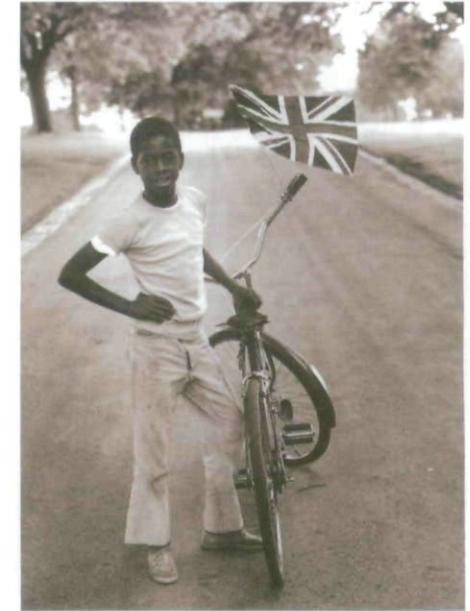
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pedagogy through their pioneering series of workshops, film familiarisation courses, and screenings. The intention, Akomfrah suggested, was 'to invent a black film culture which also means creating an infrastructure – journals, seminars, courses, a debate around the cinema, in other words, an audience'.<sup>40</sup> The group saw themselves as catalysts of a community to come – their courses constituted a pedagogical space for the birth of a new art cine-culture. The mood of the moment was epitomised in 'Black Independent Film-making: A Statement by the Black Audio/Film Collective', a text published in the summer of 1983 in *Artrage* magazine that affirmed the group's interest in the ways that 'self-evident truths become the

conventional pattern through which the black presence in cinema is secured'.<sup>41</sup> The idea of cinema as integrated practice peaked in 1985, the GLC's Year of Anti-Racism. That year, the Collective hosted two courses: 'Race Traces: Cinema and the Community', from February to March, and 'Looking Black: Workshops on Cinema, Race Aesthetics' from June until August. George's programme outline for 'Looking Black' posed some pertinent questions: Is 'Black Cinema' possible? Do we need a language of film and video? What are the black aesthetics of film and video? What should be the new cultural priorities?<sup>42</sup> Lina Gopaul looked further still; as key players in the newly formed Association of Black Film and Video

Workshops, the Collective envisioned a distribution network, summer schools and film festivals;<sup>43</sup> although George criticised the structural inadequacy of integrated practice,<sup>44</sup> the group nonetheless succeeded in growing an audience; by August 1986, the 40th Edinburgh International Film Festival was hosting the three-day 'Third Cinema: Theories and Practices' conference, a move inconceivable without the Collective's example. The group had indeed shifted the terms of discourse;<sup>45</sup> more germane to this essay are the formal implications of this discursive expansion.

An important effect of the aesthetic of epic construction was the stasis of the



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frame. The present instant of the moving image was suspended in favour of a condition of reverie. The topical temporality of *Handsworth Songs* was halted by two non-narrative sequences in which the camera travelled slowly through a darkened, abstracted space, circling magisterially around a series of photographs that had been printed at different dimensions from 5ft portrait to 5ft landscape, mounted on light stands that were covered in velvet cloth to create the illusion of perspective. These sequences were filmed over a two-day shoot at the Art and Photography Department studios of the Polytechnic of Central London. Several Black Audio works were punctuated by cinematic caesuras that functioned as spaces

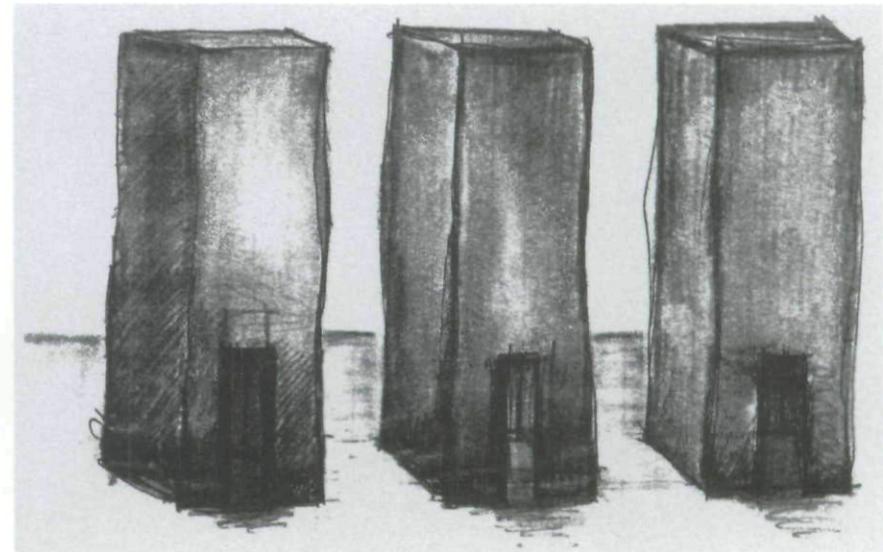


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of contemplation and display. In his essay 'On the Borderline' (1992) Akomfrah speculated upon the trope of the exhibition that recurred throughout the group's work. In Auguste's *Mysteries of July* (1991) a police storeroom of weapons was displayed with ceremonial presence. In a second sequence, a Bangladeshi London teenager and her friend visited a darkened space entitled the Museum of Dread that displayed 'an atrocity exhibition of unofficial police history'<sup>46</sup> containing mounted photographs and a mannequin of a Police Commissioner behind metal security barriers. Mathison and George's installation *The Black Room* presented at the group exhibition *Mirage: Enigmas of Difference and Desire* (1991)<sup>47</sup>

effectively translated these spaces from moving image into sculptural volumes that acted as televisual shrine to contemporary African urbanism.

If the scale of photography<sup>48</sup> in the caesuras of *Handsworth Songs* enhanced the stature of the image then the camera movements crowned the still with ceremonial value. The attitude of devotion and care bestowed upon the photograph by film epitomised one aspect of epic construction.<sup>49</sup> As archive, the image was valued not only for the access to the past it was supposed to enable but for the 'nowness of history contained in the sheer material fact of the document'.<sup>50</sup> If *Expeditions* revisited the representational



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101. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

102. Vanley Burke, *Boy with Flag, Handsworth Park, Birmingham*, 1978

103. *Mysteries of July*, 1991

104. *Outline for The Black Room*, Trevor Mathison, 1995

105. *The Black Room*, Trevor Mathison and Edward George, 1995



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genres that evoked the violence of the order with which they colluded<sup>51</sup> then *Handsworth Songs* revisited moments from Thirties British documentary in order to evoke the inoperative social conscience of the era that genre had called forth. Through the monumental close-ups of workers' faces in *Industrial Britain* (Robert Flaherty and John Grierson, 1931), the stoic restraint of *Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings, 1942) and the onward motion of *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936) Britishness was formally arranged as a hymn to labour, a song of cinema in which every worker had their place and played their role. *Handsworth Songs* resuscitated the 'historical presentness' of these images and



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simultaneously mourned their passing; its dual quality of summoning up the archive while laying it to rest imbued the film with a 'mournful angelic quality' that manifested the passing of things about Britain which 'one finds genuinely moving about its history, especially vis-à-vis film-making'.<sup>52</sup> By playing what Jennings called the 'music of Britain at war' against moments from forgotten television documentary such as *The Colony*<sup>53</sup> (Philip Donnellan, 1964), the Collective asserted a hitherto submerged affinity between the abandoned genre of the 1930s and the quashed hopes of the colonial subject, between the collapse of industry and the ruin of the very idea of social conscience.<sup>54</sup>



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##### 5. Abysmal the mystery...

*We too are actors who behold  
This ceremony; we hold  
Our breath, defying dissolution*  
Derek Walcott,  
'The Wedding of An Actress'<sup>55</sup>

The relation of still to movement within epic construction was developed in the tableaux that exist throughout the group's films. The tableau not only halted narrative; it allowed for a reflexive hiatus in which the camera staged an encounter between the film frame, the limits of photography and the form of history painting. Two tableaux of British imperial icons functioned in this way in *Handsworth Songs*; *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time*

was punctuated by mid-shot tableaux of directors George and Mathison standing in a field of sunflowers in Groombridge Place Gardens, Kent, holding prints of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888) above their heads.<sup>56</sup> In *Twilight City*, Auguste staged the high-contrast black and white photography of Rotimi Fani Kayode's *The Milk Drinker* (1986) and *The Fish Vendors* (1988) as *tableaux vivants*. In a darkened void, male figures posed in a gestural vocabulary nuanced by Christian themes of supplication complicated by the language of homoerotic encounter.<sup>57</sup> *Mysteries of July* was organised around an elaborate funerary tableau for the victims of paramilitary policing; the film is an inventory of forms of public grieving. With *Seven Songs*



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106. *Industrial Britain*, Robert Flaherty and John Grierson, 1931

107. *Listen to Britain*, Humphrey Jennings, 1942

108. *Tableau*, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

109. *The Colour of Pomegranates*, Sergei Paradjanov, 1969

110. Trevor Mathison, Groombridge Place Gardens, Kent, *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time*, 1995

111. Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *The Milk Drinker*, 1983



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for *Malcolm X*, the aesthetic of the tableau reached a peak of elaboration: the film circled around tableaux structured in seven subtitled sequences. The opening *Solitude Scenes* were adapted from specific photographs sourced from James Van DerZee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978) that exemplified the interest in the 'public character of ceremonial mourning'.<sup>58</sup> Akomfrah described the *Scenes of Eden* as 'The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Sergei Paradjanov'. What interested Akomfrah and cinematographer Arthur Jafa was not so much the frontality of Paradjanov's *The Colour of Pomegranates* (1969) but its elemental reductivism. As Akomfrah explained 'Paradjanov had a stark, primitive

idea of cinema in which stasis is more important than event or action... that was important for *Seven Songs* because it was a legend, in a way.<sup>59</sup> In moving away from narrative and history, the tableaux of *Seven Songs* conceived of figuration not as character but as personification held in a suspended state of emblematic temporality. To film these serene blue episodes, Jafa used a swing and tilt Clairmont lens whose body was made from a rubberised bellows. The rubberised bellows allowed the camera operator to bend the camera to shift the plane of focus of the lens. This increased the degree of control over the angle of light entering the lens; light could now be bent and differentiated in quality and intensity.





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112. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993

113–114. Darrick Harris as Malcolm X,  
*Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993



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The incremental differentiation of the focal plane meant that the composition could be broken down by its properties; this opened the way for an interrogation of the norms of cinematography. Variations in intensity of focus became possible; the image became intermittent, hesitant and sensitive; focus within frame became controllable to a greater degree than ever. Jafa's interest lay in stretching the plane until figuration became attenuated or 'Masai-like'. This intervention into pictorial space developed from the group's interest in the gestural quality of blur or ripple that derived from one specific funeral portrait in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.<sup>60</sup> Van DerZee understood the photographic print 'as malleable

surface(s) to be manipulated for expressive purposes'<sup>61</sup> and in his commemorative portrait of a little girl in an open casket he applied Vaseline during the development process to create the ripple that rose vertically at frame right.

#### 6. A new expressionism

*Who counts as human?*

*Whose lives count as lives?*

*And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?*

Judith Butler<sup>62</sup>

The notion of epic construction implied an intervention into the multiple technologies of the moving image. One specific scene in *Handsworth Songs* acted as an object-lesson on the production



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of racialised knowledge, revealing to viewers how film operated as a 'non-neutral technology... constructed for certain skin tones'.<sup>63</sup> As Thames Television prepared to shoot a discussion on the uprisings before a local audience, for the current affairs programme *TV Eye*, Mathison recorded the following conversation between the producer in the control room and the floor manager in the studio, without their knowledge:

**Producer:** OK Can I see the audience?

**Floor manager:** Yes, from here.

**Producer:** Is it slightly dark or light?

**Floor manager:** I don't think so. You are worried that there are not too many whites, obviously there.

**Producer:** No, in lighting terms I'm talking about. It just looks a bit down, especially in front.

**Floor manager:** I have my friend, Mr Lafamin here who says that the reason is the colour of their skins.

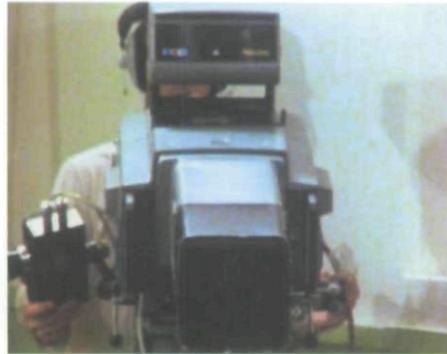
The brief conversation swerved between anxiety about lighting, concern about racial aggregation and agitation at the illegibility of skin tone. The presence of Afro-Caribbean and Asian subjects troubled the norms of televisuality provoking an uneasy movement from technical to aesthetic to racial to visual knowledges<sup>64</sup> that foregrounded the incomplete intermediation of corporeality. In a context in which white skin set



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the standard for film, BAFC could not rest at interrogating the image; more importantly, the group sought to rethink what lighting, film stock, developing and printing might become.

The notion of epic construction was then only one aspect of an overarching project: to reconfigure visuality around the Afrodiasporic subject. This did not merely mean inserting the diasporic figure into the frame nor did it entail a separatist cinema; rather it meant seizing the opportunity to invent the forms that Afrodiasporic cinema might take. Black film, Jafa had argued in an *Artforum* article in 1993, had a 'chimeralike' quality; it was 'inherently without precedent';<sup>65</sup>



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with their obsessive attention to form, multiplied to the power of seven, BAFC were positioned at the centre of this space of possibility; they could rethink film form. But obstacles immediately emerged in response to the Collective's experiments in new aesthetic language. Akomfrah recalled that upon completion of principal shooting for *Testament* (1988) the group

took the film – which we had shot without the correction filters that give films their warm look – to a lab. I'd get a print back from the lab and they'd have colour corrected it. They'd put the warmth back in. I'd ring them up and say, 'This was shot without an 85 filter so can I have a colder print?'

115. James Van DerZee, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, 1978116. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993117. Sue Coe, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, 1986118. Cameraman, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986119. *Testament*, 1988

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They'd say they changed it because they thought it didn't look right. 'It looked too cold; nobody's going to believe that that's Africa. Africa is a nice warm place.'

The Collective's vision of a dispirited Ghanaian landscape occupied by cheerless characters affronted the discursive regimes that underwrote technological norms. The group exaggerated the frigidity of the print in order to open up a distance between subject and landscape that undermined assumptions about what the image of contemporary West Africa should look like; presumptions that attempted to secure 'an unproblematic connection between character and identity,

between persona and place'.<sup>66</sup> In taking upon itself the task of interpreting BAFC's anti-realist aesthetics as an error to be corrected, the laboratory sought to contain and return their aesthetic intervention to its proper place. The laboratory's technical restoration was carried out in the name of a common sense that assumed a 'harmony between people and their location' that amounted to nothing more than 'articles of faith legitimised by a regime of truth' that assumed that 'people don't live out their individual choices, they live out their traditions and cultures'.<sup>67</sup> *Testament* was a calculated transgression at the level of the image but its implications exceeded film form. What was at stake was nothing







120. Tiffany Nelson and Tiffany Tate, *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993

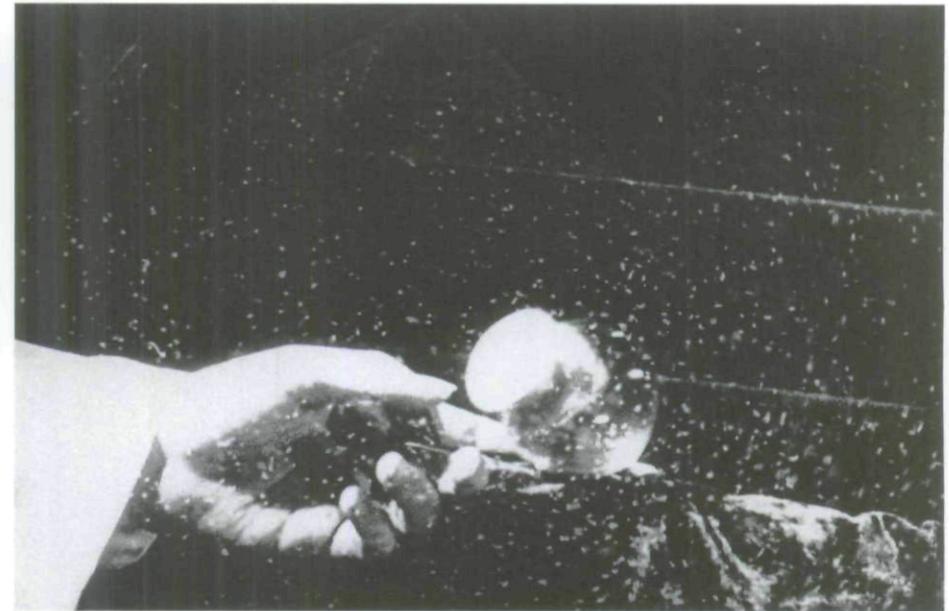
121. Olamide Faison as Young Malcolm, Tricia Rose as Malcolm X's mother, Theodore L. Cash as Malcolm's father, *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993

122. *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash, 1991

123. *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles, 1941



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less than the opportunity to rethink what Ranciere called 'the perceptual coordinates of the common'.<sup>68</sup> In 1985, the television producers recorded by Mathison had struggled to correct for diasporic aggregation; in 1988, the laboratory had attempted to reimpose a norm by defining what was 'legitimate and acceptable for blacks to think and say and feel'.<sup>69</sup> Akomfrah's statement generalised the question of aesthetic normalisation into the constitution of the conditions of audibility and visibility as such; he thereby anticipated Ranciere's notion of 'the distribution of the sensible' which was constituted by forces the philosopher named 'the police'. In Ranciere's view, the police 'are less concerned with

repression than with a more basic function: that of constituting what is or is not perceivable, determining what can or cannot be seen, dividing what can be heard from what cannot'. As Kristin Ross wrote 'The police become the name for everything that concerns the distribution of places and functions, as well as the system that legitimates such hierarchical distributions. They are another name for the symbolic constitution of the social.'<sup>70</sup> For BAFC, then, intervention at the level of form, genre, memory and technology exceeded questions of access or representation and declared nothing less than a new formulation of what counted as sound and image.

### 7. Drawing the form of things unknown

*I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes and bodies.*

Benedict de Spinoza<sup>71</sup>

Alongside directors and cinematographers such as Julie Dash, Arthur Jafa, Isaac Julien and Raoul Peck, the Collective's films sought to reimagine the aesthetic values that cinema ascribed to properties of enlightenment and occultation. Epic construction was a way of reframing the image but the project at hand was broader still; the Collective and its fellow travellers wanted to reposition the imagery of the monochromatic within the landscape of colour. The Collective

proposed to return to the moment in film history just before the emergence of colour in order to advance an alternative future led by a new kind of expressionism. A set of cinematographic ideas abandoned by 1940s Hollywood were to be reinvented for the present. In this sense, BAFC films and videos might be seen as speculative projects that conceptualised Greg Toland's cinematography for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) as a 'paintbox' for rethinking colour.<sup>72</sup> From this perspective, BAFC films and videos might be understood as experiments with monochromatic colour. They constituted a revisionist reading of black-and-white cinematography in which black was to be rethought as a differential gradation within the tonal



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palette of colour. In Akomfrah's reading of post-war aesthetics, Toland had produced a distinctive aesthetic with *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) in which black, grey and white sat in tension with each other. Toland had adapted this approach from Russian and German Expressionist cinema which posed tones in stark argument with each other to exaggerate conflict; in such a context, the main character would be foregrounded by white and set off against pools of darkness that signalled drama within the frame. German, Russian and American expressionist cinemas all shared a tendency to code the play of light and shadow as normative values. After Toland, film noir further codified the play of light and space

into a moral hierarchy; the emergence of Kodak photography then racialised this codification by privileging lighter skin tones; in the Kodak regime, white always occupied the keylights and black was always banished to the margins. Akomfrah emphasised that his account of post-war aesthetics was not to be understood as teleological; the notion of the frame could not support a critique of the inherently racist implications of chiaroscuro. For the Collective's purposes, colour was not inherently racist but was central to race considered as a technology of visibility. It was to be understood as a normative regime whose values could be altered through an intervention within the multiple forms that constituted its medial specificity.

The group's neo-expressionist aesthetic had profound implications for sound as well as image. *Who Needs A Heart* aimed to test their ideas of 'the expressionist potential of music in film'. A thesis was advanced concerning the ability of sound to 'occupy centre stage' without being subordinated to ideas or image; what was proposed was the notion that 'sound itself had a gaze, a way of constructing a look'.<sup>73</sup> This hypothesis was floated in *Who Needs A Heart's* opening credit sequence: a rostrum camera moved inexorably towards a close-up of pariah figure Michael Abdul Malik's eye which stared back at the spectator; this still motion was punctuated by an archive news report of Malik's capture in Guyana in 1972;

124–25. Intertitle for Millie's film, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

126. Unused intertitle, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

127. *Memory Room 451*, 1997

128. *Memory Room 451*, Rotherhithe, 1997

129–30. *The Last Angel of History*, 1995

heralded by an electronic threnody that alternated with sequences of a 1961 recording of long trumpet drones played by the Llamas and Tibetan Monks of the Four Great Orders. Tibetan ritual music is intended as an offering that allows the faithful the space to exist in a state of repose, 'free from motivation, free from context'.<sup>74</sup> The drone exalted the image of Malik; it bestowed a seriousness upon it that one was neither prepared for nor accustomed to. Sound set the terms for looking not in order to underline psychological territory nor to act as musical character but to shape the contours of film as terra incognita.



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Economically speaking, *Who Needs A Heart* signalled a shift in the media landscape of the early 1990s. The independent film sector was not to be subsidised but was instead expected to compete with other production companies for commissions. Black Audio Film Collective reformed itself as Black Audio Films; the group entered a new phase of practice. Their continued presence in art, film and television nonetheless complicated historical accounts of the era that typically centred around the movement of a cinema of ideas into the gallery space, a shift premised on the death of subsidised art cinema. While this diagnosis was not incorrect, it nonetheless found it difficult to account for the fact that for BAF,

television became 'one of the few places where... certain experiments could be carried out'.<sup>75</sup> Critical historiography has largely focused upon the reconfiguration of the cinematic imaginary in video art; much less attention has been paid to the formulation of a new digital aesthetic within the realm of the televisual.

From 1995 onwards, Black Audio Films were able to exploit the space of television for their project of monochromatic colour. Neo-expressionism reached its apotheosis in late video essays such as *The Last Angel of History* (1995), *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time* (1995), *Martin Luther King: Days of Hope* (1997), *Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur* (1998) and



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most strikingly in *Memory Room 451* (1997). These video-essays did not constitute either a 'counter-television aesthetics'<sup>76</sup> nor a form of 'Third Television'.<sup>77</sup> BAF videos can be seen instead as manipulations with the 'graphic possibilities of the machine'.<sup>78</sup> If BAF had reimagined the potentiality of the print in *Testament* and the lens in *Seven Songs*, then the mid-1990s found the group intent on experimenting with the specific possibilities of the digital.

#### **8. An expression of unbelonging**

*To finally have done with this God. To finally abandon the search for a space in this world. To become something other than a human being.* Edward George<sup>79</sup>

*The Last Angel of History* was to become the group's best-known later work, inspiring at least two exhibitions,<sup>80</sup> a conference,<sup>81</sup> a video-installation,<sup>82</sup> a novel<sup>83</sup> and numerous film festivals. The archaeological imperative of the early works had been projected into a future anterior; from this perspective, the ruins of the present were to be scrutinised by the figure of the Data Thief for techno-fossils. More sombrely still, *Memory Room 451* proposed a world in which dreams had become pay-per-view entertainment networks and time travel nothing more than badly paid shift work in temporal graveyards. The futurological turn evidenced by *The Last Angel* did not only respond to the technophilic narratives of the time

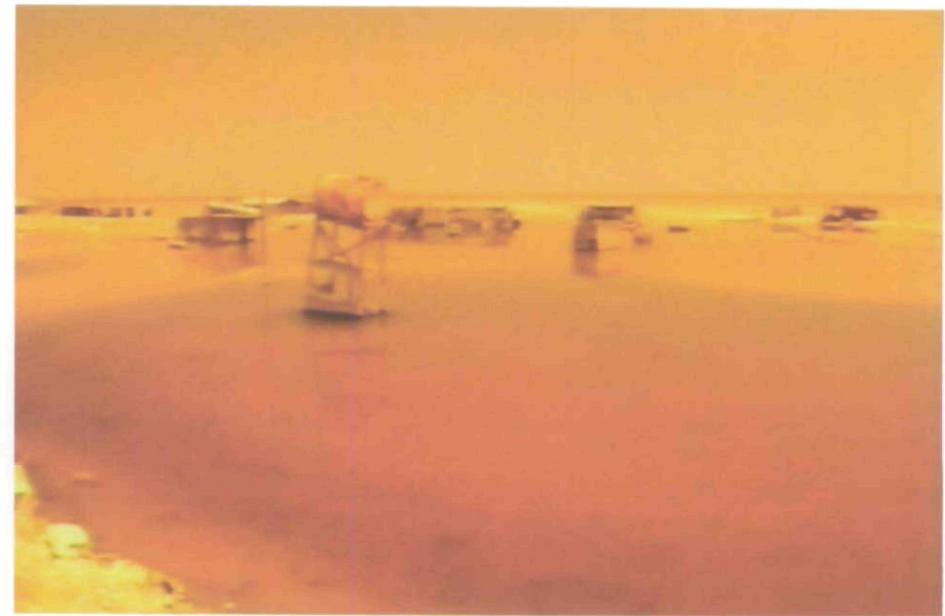


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nor did it proclaim itself a mythos for the digital diaspora. More profoundly, it identified what Akomfrah called 'inventories of Afrofuturology' that sought to complicate the regime of truth that structured the division between utopia and dystopia.<sup>84</sup> Several critical analyses<sup>85</sup> have emphasised the meta-mythologies scripted by George; what concerns this essay is the forms of stylisation that embed the film's mythopoesis.

The Collective filmed *The Last Angel of History* in Detroit and in the white heat of the Mojave Desert; at such temperatures, landscape is defined entirely by extremes of light. Akomfrah explained that the chromatic spectrum of digital technology

existed as intensities, as Kelvin values of warm or cold. By placing two 85 blue filters in front of the camera, the technology could be tricked into interpreting white heat as freezing coldness. Instead of closing down the lens to underexpose the image, the camera was forced to open up towards the light; it compensated for this excess of brightness by burning out the light, creating extremes of darkness and pools of shadow saturated with colour. Akomfrah argued that the brain used 'a retinal history' to 'calculate light' so that the eye recognised that it was being 'cheated' about 'spatial properties'. In other words, the spaces portrayed in the BAF videos were entirely posthuman scenographies that paralleled the posthuman



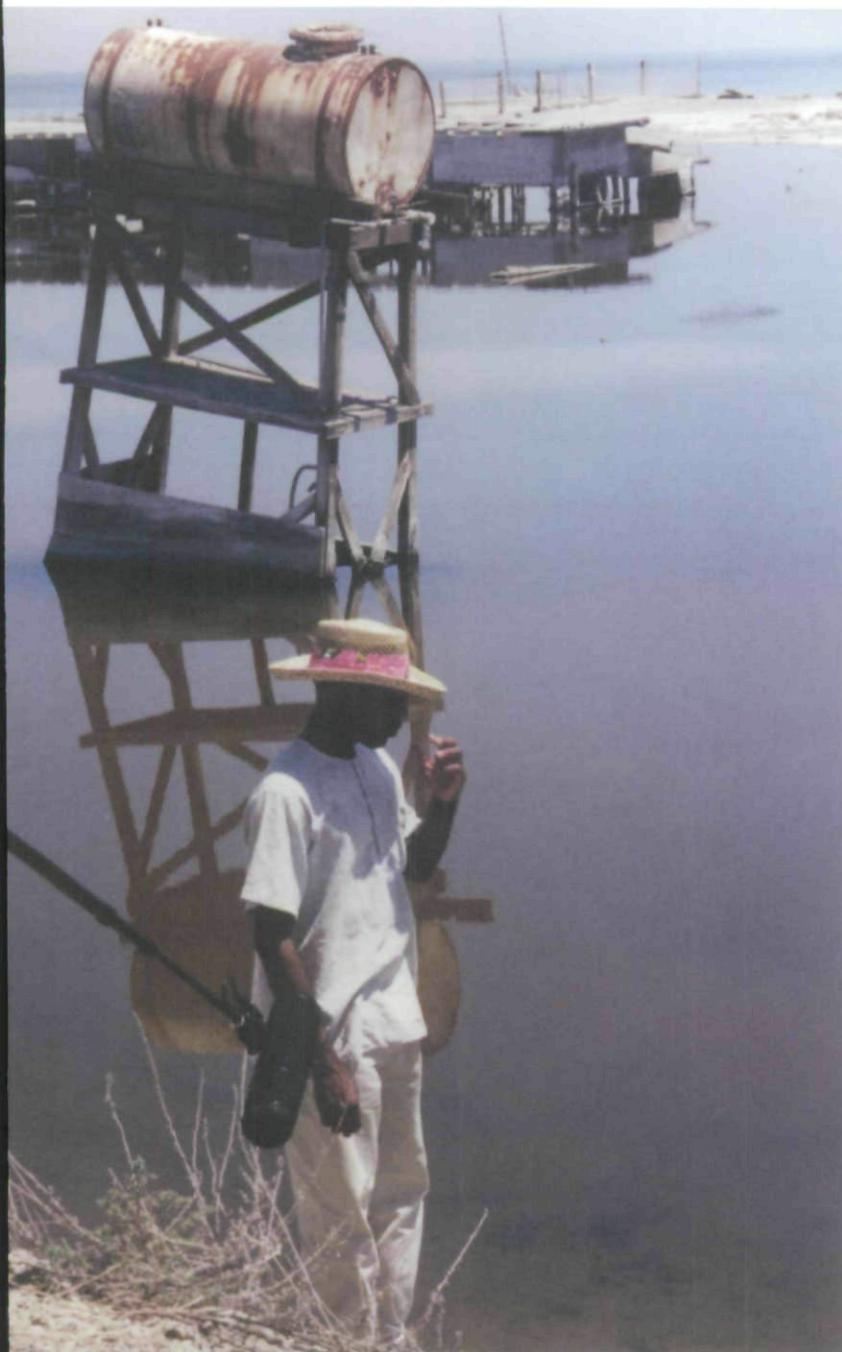
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compositions of British drum 'n' bass producers such as A Guy Called Gerald which featured in *The Last Angel of History*. The vivid yellow deserts of *The Last Angel of History*, the altered colour balance of *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time*, the occluded orange waterscapes and streaks of digital chroma that suffused the archival images of American cotton plantations<sup>86</sup> in *Memory Room 451*, the violent violet skies of *Gangsta Gangsta* and the televisual shrines of *The Black Room* were fantasia in which shadow and light shaped the contours of damaged lives. They were expressionist evocations of a posthuman condition. By exploring the development of formal signatures in the photography, collages, slide-tapes,

films, videos, multimedia installations, essays, manifestos and statements of the Black Audio Film Collective one begins to understand the ways in which the group proposed a series of inquiries addressed to the propriety of sound and the ontology of image; these questions, in turn, can be constituted as an inventory of moments of the aesthetic, of what it might be and what it could be. In tracking the artistic development of the aesthetic formulations of epic construction and neo-expressionism over sixteen years, a project emerges in which the indivisible, intractable field of poetics as politics is envisioned, revisioned, revised and produced with a formidable, far-reaching attentiveness.

## Notes

1. Henry James, *The American Scene*, quoted as epigraph to James Baldwin, *Another Country*, Vintage, 1962.
2. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, London: Tavistock Publications, 1972, p. 131.
3. Clare Joseph left BAFC in 1985; David Lawson joined in the same year.
4. See, for example, Tanya Barson, 'Time present and time past', in *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now*, Tate, 2006, p. 17.
5. Akomfrah has cited Andre Gorz's *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post Industrial Socialism* (1980) as a key text for the Collective. See also Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Verso, 1988.
6. John Akomfrah, in Kass Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead: Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary', *Border/Lines*, No. 29/30, 1993, p. 38.
7. Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, trans and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 324.
8. The work of BLK Art Group artists and others recur throughout BAFC films: Sonia Boyce, Tam Joseph and Gavin Jantjes in *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Claudette Johnson and Keith Piper in *Who Needs A Heart* (1992) and Donald Rodney in *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time* (1996).
9. See for example Eddie Chambers, 'Some Notes on Pan Africanism and Black Art in Britain', in *Run Through the Jungle: Selected Writings*, ed. Gilane Tawadros and Victoria Clarke, inIVA, 1999.
10. See Thelma Golden, 'Introduction', in *Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001, pp. 14–15; Thelma Golden and Christine Y. Kim, 'Introductory Dialogue', in *Frequency*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2004, pp. 14–17.
11. John Akomfrah, in Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead', p. 36.
12. Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, p. 324.
13. Black Audio Film Collective, *Documenta 11\_Platform 5: Exhibition*, Hatje Cantz, 2002, p. 553.
14. See Interviews recorded for The Brixton Tapes, Television History Workshop, The Other Cinema, 1982.
15. Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*.
16. Gabi Teichert in Alexander Kluge, *Die Patriotin*, 1979.
17. Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead', p. 36.
18. See Derek Walcott, 'The Royal Palms... an absence of ruins', *The London Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 11 February 1962; Zbigniew Herbert, 'Report from A Besieged City'; Wilson Harris, 'Artifice and Root' in *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983, pp. 119–37. Akomfrah had already studied Althusser in the Black Marxism Reading Group, led by Ricky Cambridge, editor of *The Black Liberator* journal.
19. Laura Mulvey, 'Magnificent Obsession': An Introduction to the Work of Five Photographers' (1985), in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: Macmillan, 1991, p. 129.
20. Akomfrah, 'On the Borderline', *Ten 8*, Vol. 2 No. 1, Spring 1991, p. 52.
21. Edward George, 'When I am Queen, you will be too: Interviews and moments, real and imagined; a supplement', 1987, unpublished.
22. Mathison, George and Joseph studied Fine Art, Akomfrah, Auguiste and Gopaul studied Sociology, Johnson studied Psychology. Mathison went on to gain an MA in Mixed Media at Chelsea School of Art while Auguiste studied for an MA in Comparative Literature and Cross Cultural Aesthetics at University of Essex.
23. Images such as McPherson and Oliver (attr.), *The Scourged Back*, 1863, a carte-de-visite of a male slave in profile, hand at his side, his back a mass of scars and welts; later appropriated by Carrie Mae Weems for her work *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–96).
24. See Margaret Dickinson, ed., *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–1990*, BFI Publishing, pp. 308–09. See also www.cooponline.coop for the history of the British cooperative movement.
25. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, 1994, p. 192.
26. Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Ways of Contemporary Photography' (1928), in *Alexandr Rodchenko*, ed. M. Dabrowski, L. Dickerman, P. Galassi, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, p. 88.
27. Akomfrah, in Banning, 'Feeding Off the Dead', p. 38.
28. BBC TV's flagship news programme.
29. Author of *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922), Lugard was High Commissioner of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria from 1900 to 1906 and responsible for amalgamating Nigeria into a single colony from 1914.
30. Mathison, interview with author, December 2005.
31. Jah Shaka can be seen in *Handsworth Songs* and in Franco Rosso's *Babylon* (1980). The Collective attended Shaka's soundsystem dances throughout the 80s and 90s.
32. Akomfrah and George attended Cabaret Voltaire and Test Department concerts at this time. See Cabaret Voltaire *Double Vision* (Mute, 2004) and Test Department *Program for Progress* (1982–84, Cherry Red, 2006), for examples of their multimedia work. See Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, London: Faber & Faber, 2006, pp. 170–71.
33. Mulvey, 'Magnificent Obsession', p. 129.
34. Leah Dickerman, *The Propandizing of Things*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, p. 88.
35. George, 'When I am Queen, you will be too'.
36. A condition named by Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 183–211.
37. X-Ray Spex, 'Identity', A&M, 1978.
38. Hilda Kean, *The Transformation of Political and Cultural Space in London from Punk to Blair*, ed. Joe Kerr and Andrew Gibson, London: Reaktion Books, 2003.
39. Alison Butler, 'The Half Open Door, Channel Four and Independent Production in the UK', *The Independent, Film and Video Monthly*, October 1987, p. 15.
40. John Fitzpatrick, 'Hackney meets Hollywood', *Living Marxism*, September 1989, p. 45.
41. John Akomfrah, 'Black Independent Film-making: A Statement by the Black Audio/Film Collective', *Artrage*, No. 3/4, Summer 1983.
42. Looking Black programme notes.
43. Lina Gopaul, in conversation with author, July 2006.
44. Edward George, 'New Directions in Training' (1985) and Lina Gopaul, 'Which Way Forward?' (1985) both in this volume.
45. See Jim Pines, 'Introduction', in *The Association of Black Film and Video Workshops Brochure*, BFI, 1988 and June Givanni, 'A Curator's Conundrum: Programming "Black Film" in 1980s–1990s Britain', *The Moving Image*, Vol. 4, November 1 Spring 2004, pp. 60–75.
46. The notion of 'The Atrocity Exhibition' referenced both the title of J. G. Ballard's condensed novel (1970) and Donald Rodney's first solo exhibition 'The Atrocity Exhibition and other Empire Stories' (1986).
47. See *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, ICA/inIVA, 1995.
48. The enlarged photographs of married couples in the 1950s were sourced from the archives of Birmingham City Library while *Boy with Flag, Handsworth Park, Birmingham, England*, 1978 is the work of Vanley Burke. See Stuart Hall, 'Vanley Burke and the "Desire for Blackness"', in *Vanley Burke: A Retrospective*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, p. 12 and Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, 'Everyday People: Vanley Burke & the Ghetto as Genre', in *Back to Black, Art, Cinema & the Racial Imaginary*, ed. R. J. Powell, D. A. Bailey and P. Archer-Straw, Whitechapel Gallery, 2005, pp. 175–82.
49. Hall, 'Vanley Burke and the "Desire for Blackness"', p. 15.
50. Uriel Orlow, 'Latent Archives, Roving Lens', in *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists Film and Video*, ed. Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon, Picture This, 2006, p. 35.
51. Coco Fusco, 'Black Filmmaking in Britain's Workshop Sector', *Afterimage*, February 1988, p. 13.
52. Akomfrah, in Paul Gilroy and Jim Pines, 'Handsworth Songs: Audiences/ Aesthetics/ Independence', *Framework*, No. 35, 1988, p. 13.
53. *Handsworth Songs* reworked four sequences from *The Colony* which was set in Birmingham; each scene was tinted in blue or sepia yellow, interviewers' and interviewees' voices were removed and scenes rescored with a *musique concrète* soundtrack composed by Mathison.
54. Robert Collis and Phillip Dodd, 'Representing the Nation: British Documentary Film 1930–1945', *Screen*, Vol. 26 No. 1, January–February 1985, p. 23.
55. Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948–1984*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.



56. See Donald Rodney: *Doublethink*, ed. Richard Hylton, Autograph, 2003.
57. See Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Alex Hirst, ed. Mark Sealy, *Revue Noir/Autograph*, 1997.
58. Kobena Mercer, *James Van DerZee*, London: Phaidon, 2003, p. 108.
59. Akomfrah, in conversation with author, March 2006.
60. *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, James Van DerZee, Owen Dodson and Camille Billops, New York, Morgan & Morgan, 1978.
61. Mercer, *James Van DerZee*, p. 108.
62. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, 2004, p. 20.
63. See Isaac Julien and Nina Kellgren in conversation, *Looking for Langston*, brochure notes, BFI, 2005, pp. 11–12. Kellgren, Director of Photography on *Looking for Langston*, said 'at the time, the metering system, the grey scale was all based around Caucasian skin, and you can't just... work at it, in a standard way that you would with white skin, around which the whole technology was based, so you have to approach it in a very different way. We had tremendous discussions about this and I got a great education from the directors.'
64. See Richard Dyer, *White, Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 82.
65. Arthur Jafa, 'Like Rashomon but Different', *Artforum*, June 1993.
66. Thomas Allen Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora: An Interview with John Akomfrah', *Afterimage*, April 1992, p. 10.
67. Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora', p. 11.
68. Gabriel Rockhill, 'Translator's Introduction', in Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 3.
69. Harris, 'Searching the Diaspora'.
70. Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 23.
71. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 69.
72. John Akomfrah, interview with author, March 2006.
73. Pervaiz Khan, 'Black and White', *Sight and Sound*, May 1992, pp. 30-31.
74. Akomfrah in conversation with author, Tate Britain, October 2004.
75. Akomfrah in conversation with author, March 2006.
76. As suggested by Butler, 'The Half Open Door', p. 17.
77. As a parallel to Third Cinema proposed by Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain, Black and Asian Images on Television*, London: Thousand Oaks, Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002, p. 164.
78. John Akomfrah, in conversation, March 2006.
79. Edward George, '(ghost the signal)', in this volume.
80. *Mothership Connection*, Stedelijk Museum Bureau, December 1996–January 1997.
81. *Loving the Alien*, September, 1997 Volksbühne. See also *Loving the Alien: Science Fiction, Diaspora, Multikultur*, ed. Dietrich Dietrichsen, Berlin: ID Verlag, 1998.
82. Isaac Julien in conversation with John Akomfrah, at the 'From Badass to Last Angel' screening at *The Other Cinema*, London 22 November 2004. Julien stated that his film *Baltimore* was influenced by *The Last Angel of History*.
83. See Thomas Meinecke, *Helblau*, Roman Suhrkamp, 2001.
84. John Akomfrah, unpublished lecture, Goldsmiths College, November 2004. See also Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line*, Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 2000. pp. 327–56.
85. See Sean Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics*, London: Sage, 1998; Ruth Mayer, *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalisation*, Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 2002; and Sheila J. Petty, 'Afrofuturist Visions in John Akomfrah's *The Last Angel of History*', forthcoming.
86. These animations, designed by Mathison and Pervaiz Khan, anticipated Jeremy Blake's digital animations for Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Punch Drunk Love* (2002) by six years.







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131. Edward George, the Mojave Desert,  
*The Last Angel of History*, 1995

132–33. The Mojave Desert, *The Last Angel  
of History*, 1995

134. John Akomfrah, Dewald Akeuma, Lina Gopaul,  
*Memory Room 451*, 1997

135. Tupac Shakur memorial, New York,  
*Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur*, 1998

136. Trevor Mathison, Edward George, on location,  
*Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur*, 1998

# COALITION BUILDING: BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE AND TRANSNATIONAL POST-COLONIALISM

OKWUI ENWEZOR

## Psychic Splits: Dialectics of Crisis and Renewal

One of the central qualities of the revolutionary discourse of modernism and the art that defined its most progressive ideals during the twentieth century is the enduring idea of an ever-creative self-destruction and constant reinvention. The assaults on the formal, discursive and material elements (and propriety) of modern art allowed artists to participate in the dual characteristics often ascribed to modernity: progress and change and the rapid transformation of social experience brought about by urbanisation and industrialisation. At the helm of the cycle of destruction,

deconstruction and reconstitution were various entities of the historical avant-gardes. In each stage of this phoenix-like transformation – both in terms of form and content, methodology and concept – modern art, in the hands of avant-garde artists, deployed a set of dialogical constructs (classicism and modernity, destruction and renewal, for example) to distinguish its critical models from those that had dominated the work of the previous generation of Western European artists up to Edouard Manet. Artists from Cezanne onwards would attack the spatial stability of painterly perspective which subsequently came to influence the work of Braque and Picasso.

At the same time as these changes were occurring, artists of the European avant-gardes were being confronted with new notions of form through their cross-cultural encounters with non-European art and objects. These encounters, though historicised as part of the legacy of the historical avant-gardes, existed at the juncture where colonial and colonised cultures met, and would become relativised as the encounter between the modern and the primitive. In this way a significant aspect of modernism was its response to subjectivity and identity; more specifically, the manner in which notions of primitivism pressed upon Western avant-garde artists to sublimate the values of non-Western artistic canons. So from its early

137. Photographic test, *Expeditions*, 1982

formulation, Western modernism, seen from within its source (modernity), was singularly endowed with the canny ability of endless repetition: it constantly staged a revolt not only within its means of production, but in its relationship to subjectivity and identity (Van Gogh), in its exploration of the dialogic intersection between self and other (Gauguin), and – a constant in its methods and discourses – in the carnal association between the primitive and the modern (Picasso).

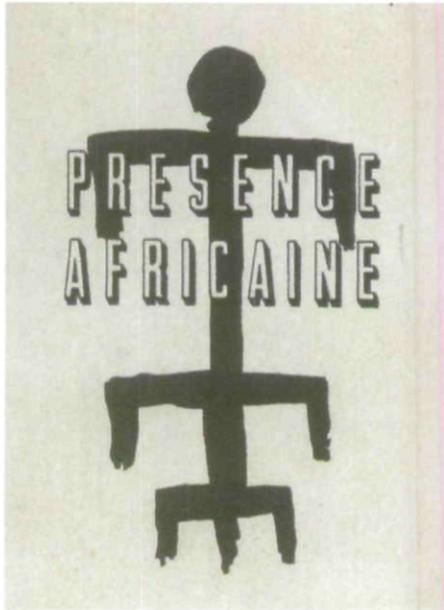
This conjunction of modernism and primitivism is a commonplace, but critical reflection on modernism has been less rigorous in addressing issues of race and identity, especially the question raised by



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what Frantz Fanon identified as an epidermal schema:<sup>1</sup> the issue of race writ large and overwritten by processes of historical repression (Surrealism being one example) which would be recuperated by artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and Negritude in France in the 1920s and 1940s, respectively.<sup>2</sup> This epidermal schema, transposed to the values of subjectivity and identity, is a harbinger of some of the preoccupations of multiculturalism in the 1980s.

Before examining this legacy and how it plays out in the narrative, documentary and experimental films and writings of Black Audio Film Collective and its larger



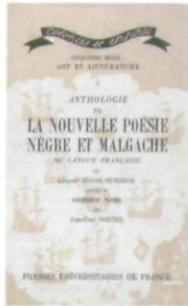
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submersion in the rhetoric of diaspora and the production of transnational post-colonialism, it is important to underscore modernism's attachment to processes of renewal. Revolutionary modernist artists worked simultaneously to degrade and rejuvenate the dim embers of modernism and its progressive critical models, first by attacking and pitting themselves against both traditionalists and progressives; and secondly, by recourse to self-analysis (a form of return of the repressed): a return, no doubt, linked to forms of self-questioning through acts of indiscipline and refusal of convention. Today these acts of transgression against the rules of modernism's practice and procedures have been largely adopted

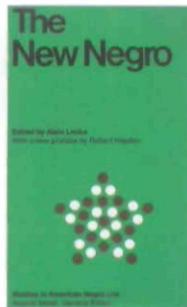
and enshrined as the central legacy of the historical avant-gardes as health-giving dissenters of modern art. The history of the insurgency perpetrated by the twentieth-century avant-garde movements can therefore be understood from these procedures of renewal: moving from backwardness to enlightenment, from convention to experimentation, from stability to instability. Understood in this way, these were attacks articulated not only within the forms of artistic practice but were also staged at the base of society and its institutions.

#### **Antinomies of the Multitude**

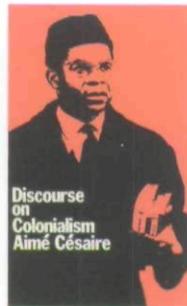
The Western historical avant-gardes thus developed their rethinking of modernist practices in two fundamental ways, each related to how modern art sits within systems of institutional legitimation on the one hand, and within the bourgeois tastes of Western society at large on the other. On the first level artists responded to perceived crises in their given discipline, requiring a complete rethinking of the parameters of the object and its content. As a consequence, twentieth-century modernism was constituted – in relation to avant-garde practices – by a range of antinomies. The most obvious example is the perceptual reordering engineered by



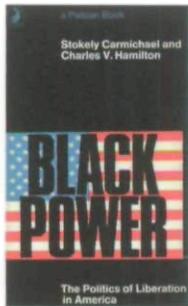
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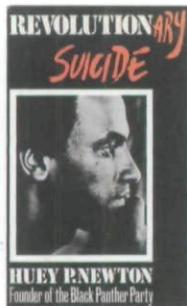
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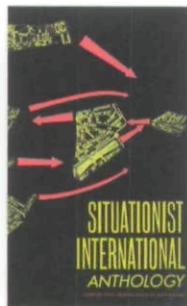
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138. The First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, 1956

139. Group photograph of delegates to the First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, The Sorbonne, Paris, 1956

140. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache de Langue Française*, introduction by Jean Paul Sartre, 1948

141. Alain Locke (ed.) *The New Negro*, 1925

142. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 1955

143. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, 1967

144. Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 1973

145. *The Situationist International Anthology*, 1981

Cubism, and by extension the transformation of medium purity by the Cubist collage, and of temporal and narrative continuity in the use of montage in film. On another level there was a deeper antinomy, the reality of which is the pervasive social crisis evidenced by large-scale cultural, political and economic changes early in the twentieth century, such as the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and the increasing domination of everyday life by forces of industrial capitalism.

A third antinomy, one which since the late nineteenth century has become the leitmotif of modernity, is the massive movement of people across political and cultural borders. These migrations throughout the twentieth century transformed the cultural maps of many nations, making the idea of border crossing a key motif of dwelling, a zone from which new cultural practices were formed and sustained. Underscoring this, in our time, post-colonial migration – most of which occurred after the collapse of European colonial projects in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – deepened what it means to be cosmopolitan.

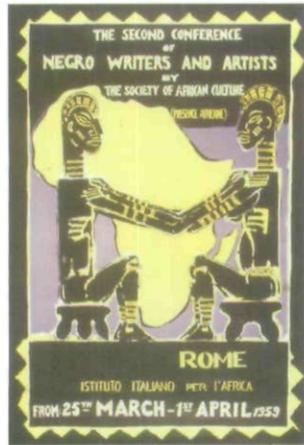
However, this cosmopolitanism is widely divergent from the émigré culture of *fin de siècle* Paris. London and Paris – which were headquarters of substantial colonial empires – experienced a different sort of migration in the post Second World War period.

Even in the United States, the massive black migration from the South to the urban centres of the North was a product of the third antinomy. It made places such as Harlem into cosmopolitan centres of black culture, and gave rise to the loose collective of writers and artists that form the Harlem Renaissance. This large black migration to the cities of the North, like the post Second World War post-colonial migrations that accelerated in Europe, bringing a new flow of immigrants, transformed key cultural forms of Western urban life. The Negritude movement – another loose collective of pan-African writers and artists formed in Paris between the wars – is, like the Harlem Renaissance group in New York, part of the cultural process of migration. In a sense the development of these collectives seems always bound to issues concerning the conceptualisation of the *multitude*, that is, they emerge with a sense of historical awareness of group identification and a desire to effect changes in institutional paradigms. As such, collective activities can be located at the level of the *multitude*, in order to articulate key deficits in cultural and political positions.

The *multitude*, like most revolutionary forces, therefore emerges from crisis. The loss of space in the social forums of society or the lack of participation in the development of historical processes is often a driving force behind these

146. Poster, The Second Conference of Negro Writers and Artists, Rome, 1959

147. *The Black Liberator*, Vol. 2, No. 3  
June 1974–January 1975



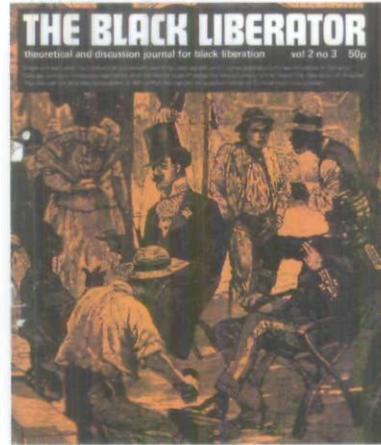
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formations. The protest movements of the 1960s produced situations for the amelioration and deconstruction of standards of cultural and artistic practice. From anti-colonial movements, the radical liberationist politics of guerrilla and environmental groups such as The Black Panther Party in the US, FLN in Algeria, PLO in Palestine, Red Army Faction, Red Army in Japan, Greenpeace, Animal Liberation Front and other groups were not exclusively centred in the sphere of politics. In the same way, there occurred a parallel field of activities in the sphere of culture, whereby artistic responses to the political crisis that pervaded the 1960s and the 1970s brought into focus the work of collectives such as Tucuman Arde

148. *The Black Panther*, Saturday, October 19, 1969

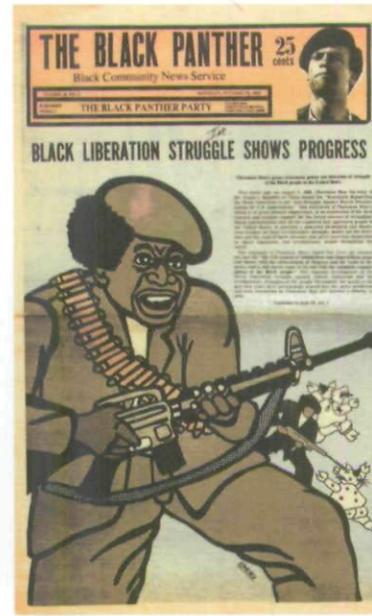
149. *The Black Panther*, Saturday, November 13, 1969

150. *Images of Nationality*, 1982–84



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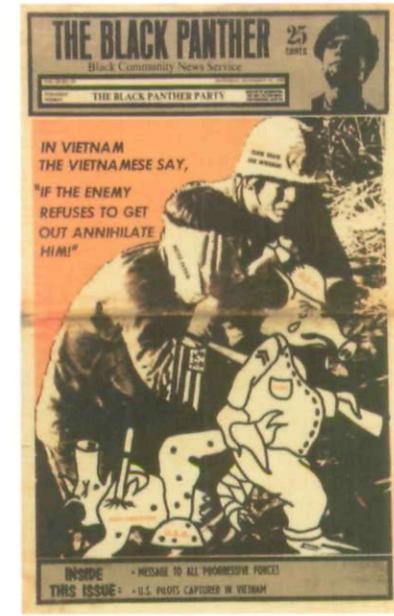
(Rosario, Argentina), Laboratoire Agit-Art (Dakar, Senegal), Artists and Writers' Protest and Spiral (New York), and Arts West Associated (Los Angeles). In the case of Tucuman Arde, the great rupture that needed to occur was in the separation of aesthetics from art, and in so doing the approach of their practice was orientated towards producing a 'violent collective action' out of which new cultural content could emerge.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Laboratoire Agit-Art, the tactics of rupture were directed simultaneously at the ossified politics of the post-colonial State and the institutionalised form of commodity objects to which Senegalese artists had surrendered.<sup>4</sup> For the American groups, their work emerged directly from



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concerns developed out of the civil rights and black power movements, fusing cultural activism and the strategy of protest in their work. According to Kellie Jones, the groups 'became involved with civil rights, disarmament, and anti-war issues, participating in letter-writing campaigns, interventions in newspapers, protest marches and pursuing a focus in integration into museums and other mainstream art world settings'.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar vein, the Situationists' notion of psychogeographic practices as part of the revolution of everyday life advances a model of collective activity and action upon the social fabric. These models represent articulations of the productivity

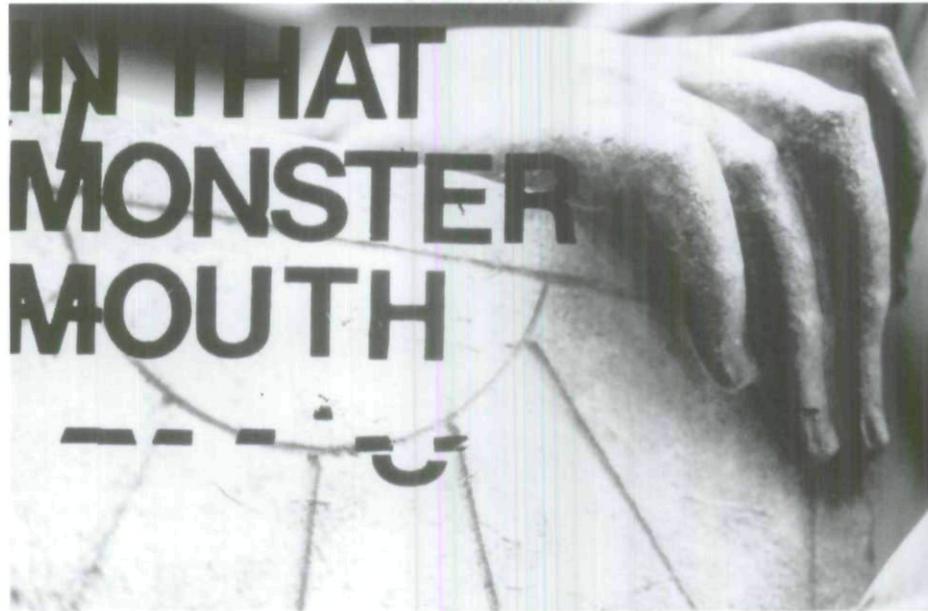


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of collective thinking. They enunciate distinctive protocols of collective endeavour. Artists of different political and cultural persuasions understood the importance of the *multitude* in the conceptualisation and production of space, as an activity no longer connected to discrete practices of individual artists, but as statements connected to what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt enunciated as 'life in common'.<sup>6</sup> In Hardt and Negri's formulation, 'life in common' is at the root of the collective power of the *multitude*. It is produced across boundaries of difference, in solidarity, with broad forms of affiliation, 'in a spiral, expansive relationship'.<sup>7</sup>

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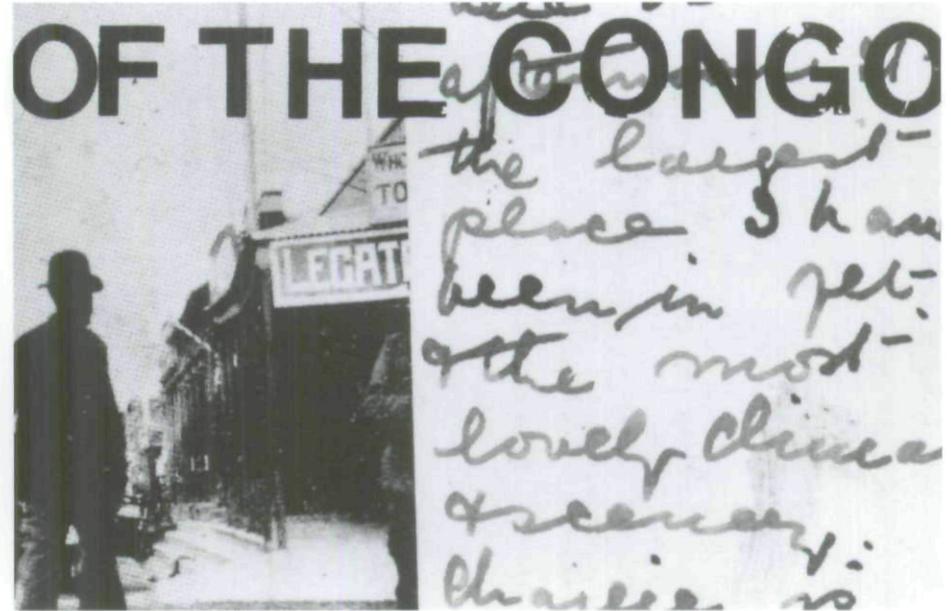




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If the Situationists advocated the dispersed perambulations of the *derive* as the means by which the *multitude* achieves part of its social restitution, the Brazilian conceptual artists Helio Oiticica and Cildo Meireles advocated something else at the level of the social and ideological respectively. For Oiticica, the *Parangole*, the multi-coloured capes he designed for performances that traversed the various contours of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, can be likened to a form of social attire; one which allows the celebrants of his collectivised performances to stake a claim to and produce a new social space. On the other hand Meireles attempted to pierce the opacity of the public sphere of Brazil's political culture dominated by the military dictatorship

from the 1960s to the 1980s through what he calls *insertions into ideological circuits*. These insertions were conceptual works conceived for free, random distribution of key political statements in the sphere of exchange and the commodity. Here, though, the individual artist is not working along the lines of the modernist notion of the autonomous artist, but as a member of a broad affiliation of citizens engaged in cultural dispute with authorities of power and systems of enclosure that they impose on free expression. In the proposals of the Situationists, Oiticica and Meireles, the articulation of social production converges with and diverges from the early methods of the European historical avant-garde collectives which tended to be grounded

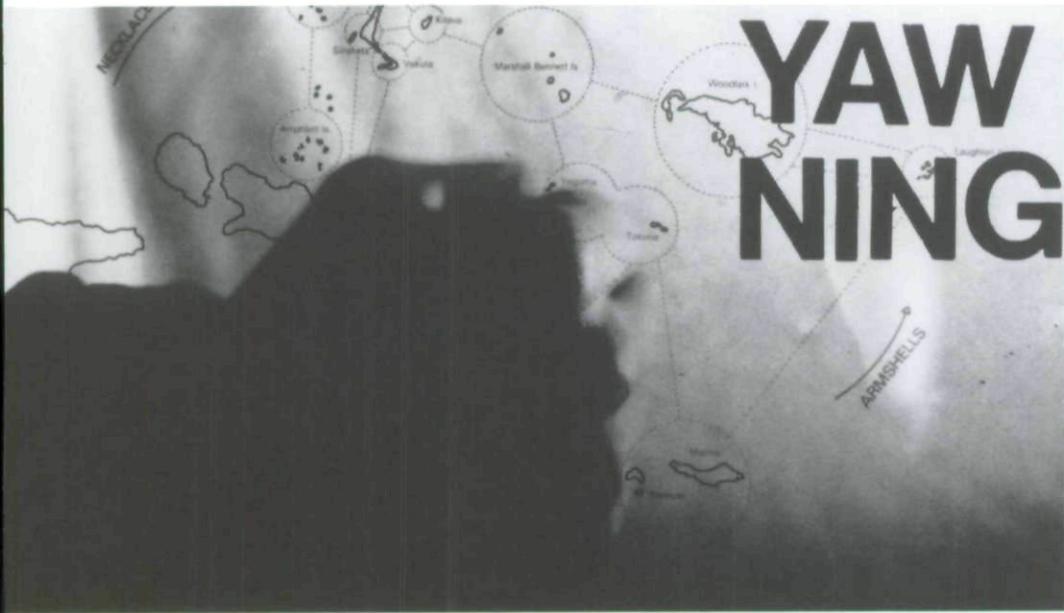


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in the narrow sense of a collective as a body of producers. However, attributes of the historical avant-garde strategies serve as important precedents for the activities of later groups. Therefore, in their meeting and separation, these strategies and activities highlight the key lexicons of collectivity: from the more traditional interventions of the early European avant-gardes which attacked the circuits of production and institutional canons of legitimation to transnational avant-garde formations which centred their expressions across broader cultural, political and social formations. Meireles, in a statement from 1970, captures this divergence in a reference to Duchamp's work. He writes: 'If Marcel Duchamp

intervened at the level of Art (logic of phenomena), what is done today, on the contrary, tends to be closer to Culture than to Art, and that is necessarily a political intervention...'<sup>8</sup>

This statement helps us in situating the critical parameters that inform the cinematic and intellectual ambitions of Black Audio Film Collective as the late modernist approaches to action of the 1970s gave way to the postmodernist strategies of critique of totalisation and grand narratives of the 1980s. Taken together, some of these developments are key indicators for understanding the critical development of BAFC in the early 1980s in London. There was no question that the



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1980s marked a period of rethinking of forms of cultural power and representation among minority artists and intellectuals in England. If BAFC's emergence coincided with the collectivised and radicalised aspirations of British racial minorities, the group's critical project could be understood as rising from the base of a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan *multitude* based on a series of transnational intersections.

#### Figurations of Ethnicity

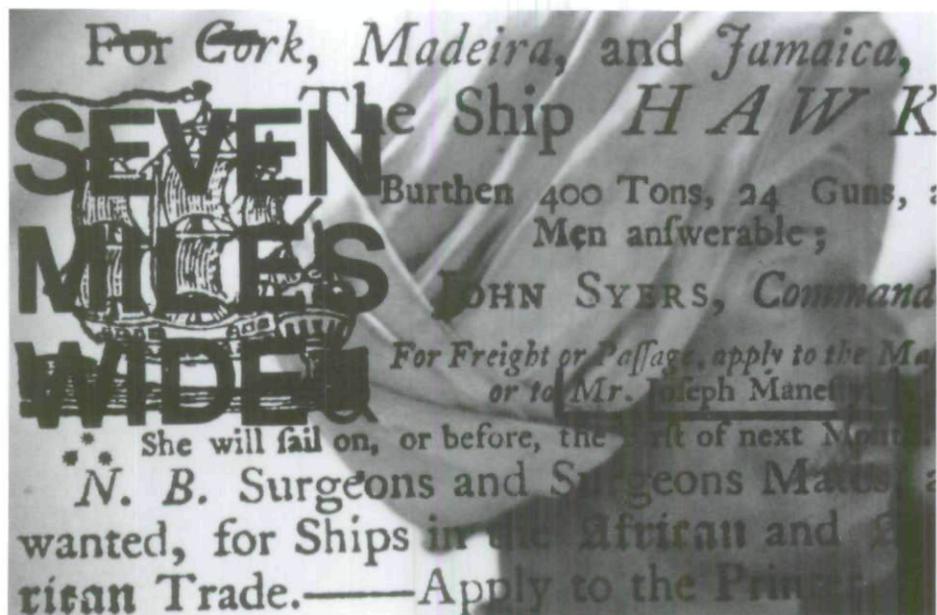
I have used this outline partially to orient us towards a more historically inflected reception of the emergence of Black Audio Film Collective, especially as part of that unique hybrid of post-colonial artist/intellectual practice. The task of this account, therefore, is not to rehearse many of the commonplaces of modernist history; rather, it is to examine certain genealogies of radical practice, and their implications for the work of groups such as BAFC. More specifically, I began an account of modernist and early avant-garde collectives in order to seek possible connections between the different models that emerged at the end of the twentieth

century. My goal is also to move beyond these models in order to show a new side of the faceted coins of modernism and contemporary art. What I intend to do is provide a basic and cursory review.

The main historical period that concerns us is the 1980s, the decade when BAFC was first formed by a coalition of young black British film-makers. The group wanted to formulate a non-hegemonic regime of cinema practice that did not sublimate the specificity of black and diasporic critical models through the whitewash of mainstream white liberal systems of representation. Emerging from the British film workshop model, a model connected to leftist labour practices,<sup>9</sup>

151–57. *Images of Nationality*, 1982–84

BAFC's formation is bound up in the spirit, the zeitgeist of the post-Notting Hill riots in which the black British community contested their social invisibility and political powerlessness. BAFC, and related groups such as Sankofa Film Collective and Ceddo, were young film-makers intent on disarming the primitivist social model reserved for Asians, Africans, West Indians and Muslims in Britain. The focus of BAFC's analysis – the analytical purpose of the cinema being proposed is key here – was a cinema centred around complex accounts of black subjectivity. In the manifesto (*Do not all avant-gardes publish manifestos?*) 'Black Independent Film-making: A Statement by the Black Audio/Film Collective'<sup>10</sup>



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published in *Artrage*, John Akomfrah reflects succinctly on the task of independent black British cinema: 'What, after all does "black independent film-making" mean when present film culture is a largely white affair?' he asks. In his response he not only discusses the agency of black film-makers, but also sets up the implicit task of the group's work as directed towards the deconstruction of the fetishistic attachment to the cult of the auteur which earlier independent avant-garde film-makers such as those of the French New Wave had embraced. The logic of collectivity they were to adhere to was not based exclusively on collectivised labour, but also included forms of identification and modes of

spectatorship with a broader transnational historical framework. To bring together two ideals of collectivity, namely the forms of division of labour specific to the group and the broader alignment with questions of black and diasporic histories, Akomfrah then emphasised the central task: 'The Black Audio Film Collective has chosen to take up these issues in a very particular way, and this is around the question of the "figuration of ethnicity" in cinema'.<sup>11</sup> The quest also included the 'attempt to look critically at how racist ideas and images of black people are structured and presented as self-evident truths in cinema'.<sup>12</sup>



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### Rapports des forces: Resisting Representation

It is important to place Akomfrah's statement in the context of the emerging consensus among various post-colonial and decolonisation movements which insisted that the tools of representation must be wrested away from the disciplining grip of various state organs and their repressive policy initiatives which target minorities living in the West. This state machinery also acted at long distance through the export of proxy terror to suppress the cultural goals of large majorities in client states: Iran and Afghanistan are two important examples, especially in the early part of the decade during the populist

conservative regimes of Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain. This was the period of high Cold War. Equally significantly, the early years of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the guerilla war in Afghanistan against the Soviet army brought to the fore the forces of radical Islamic politics. There were, as well, divergent cultural positions that defined some of the practices of the time: feminist, gender, queer, multicultural, subalternist and Pan-Africanist theories to name just a few. Perhaps these alignments should suggest a rethinking of what we mean by collectivity. One can distinguish between formal collectives and informal collectives. Formal collectives are those groups such as BAFC organised specifically



**DIRTY ITS CONTENTS**



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as a working group with a signature that designates the specificity of their practice and identification with a product, image, text, etc. Informal collectives are broad-based social movements that galvanise individual supporters around common interests in order to affect and correct critical deficit in the political and social sphere. Such movements do not have a defined membership, but engage adherents and supporters across the political, economic and cultural classes. The feminist movement is one example.

Given these shifts during the 1980s, many of which began in the 1960s, the political and cultural frontlines of the world were moving, sliding away from the

dominant forms of coercive power and hegemonic institutional practice which had defined the Cold War. Viewed from the vantage point of the present, a centrifugal force was building: it was then in its nascent stage. The world was in play. There were being formed what Pierre Bourdieu called *rappports des forces*, a kind of coalition of radical counterpower. Seen thus, the 1980s was the period when the forces of resistance were placed at the radial joints of a new oppositional politics of form and representation. The kind of work produced by collectives began to take critical stock of the long-standing problems between representation and social repression. They were based on certain types of mild iconoclasm. Looking

back it becomes clear – with groups such as ACT UP, Group Material, Autograph, IRWIN, Guerilla Girls, Urban Bush Women, REPO History, Gran Fury, Colectivo Cine Ojo – that this decade marked a watershed, a golden era of collective artistic practice in contemporary art and culture at large. This happened not only because the contemporary artistic and cultural spheres were in a state of volatility, but also because political developments in the post-colonial world brought artists and intellectuals face to face with a reconfigured subaltern articulation of a new cultural and political discourse. If the rules of the game in modernism had had a coherent self-understanding, an inner tension that

158. Photographic test, *Expeditions*, 1982–84  
159–61. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

the artists of the historical avant-gardes reacted to, either in opposition or parasitic collusion, then the fact of the post-colonial shattered that sense of coherence, particularly in the case of contemporary art and culture. Post-colonial subjectivity thwarted and frustrated the old assumption of stable categories within which permissible forms of rebellion were allowed to occur. Rather than a singular modernity,<sup>13</sup> as Fredric Jameson has argued recently, post-colonial subjectivity placed a premium on and argued for the priority of multiple modernities. This represents a signal shift from the dialectic of crisis and renewal to the dialectic of crisis and difference, a primal challenge to the certitudes of Western totalisation.

**Transnational Post-colonialism:  
Dialectics of Crisis and Difference**

The aesthetic and ideological programme of BAFC rests on this fundamental fact: the dialectic of crisis and difference is what distinguishes its form of avant-gardism from that of the historical avant-gardes. How might we situate this signal moment in the practice of BAFC? One must begin from the ground of transnational post-colonialism. By this term I mean to introduce a set of historical and theoretical frameworks shared by loose and sometimes incommensurate alliances, between various decolonising social forces,<sup>14</sup> progressive political movements, and a new cross-cultural coalition between intellectuals, artists and activists that spans different ethnic and national groups with a shared history and experience of colonisation. Arriving in Western European cities in the immediate post-war years, as immigrants, students and guest workers, these groups shared another common experience: they lived on the margins of the host societies where they had settled. But one enduring historical experience, especially in the context of Britain, was the connection to the British Empire and its social intervention into the subjectivity of the native. The members of BAFC shared this legacy of empire.

It was therefore in salutary recognition of this fact of empire – its exaggerated

moral imperative, its civilising pomposity – that BAFC's first project *Expeditions: Signs of Empire/ Images of Nationality* served as an intellectual inauguration of the key themes of their work: race, ethnicity, difference, colonialism, empire, hybridity, exile and transnational post-colonialism. In *Expeditions*, we are confronted with the question of the incessant return to the historical archive as the ground zero for an archaeology of colonial subjectivity, and as Homi Bhabha reminds us, as a scene of ambivalence.<sup>15</sup> What is fascinating about this first outing of BAFC is the prototypical form of its cinematic language: the 35mm slide tape. Having promulgated a manifesto outlining its intentions, the question is why did BAFC choose this proto-cinematic route? The answer may lie in the formal structure of the work, especially in its intertextual reworking of text, sound and image, each sliding across the space of the other, occluding, excavating and amplifying the simultaneous relay of history, commentary and sonic affect. *Expeditions* demonstrates a key element that has been constant in all of BAFC's film work, the use of the visual and aural sample. More specifically, it underscores the importance of the archive as more than a metaphor for archaeology. Rather, the archive is both a residual trace and, as the refrain in *Handsworth Songs* suggests, a ghost machine incubating the ghosts of many other stories. Rather than being a moving image machine, *Expeditions* is a kind of writing



machine in the sense that the archival images drawn from the cupboards of empire are textualised. Thus, BAFC began their critical project not from the point of view of a moving image culture, but as a writing project, with the archive of empire representing a site for rewriting the narratives of empire. It is the numbing, repetitive, sinister, almost electronic voice-over that transforms and informs the languidly paced movement of the slide dissolves. As one listens, a voice continuously intones: 'The ones who are born here, if you look they are young people really... I think they don't know who they are or what they are... really what you're asking is how one gives them a sense of belonging...'

*Expeditions* alerts us not only to the rewriting of the crisis of empire, but reminds us of the psychic rupture inherent in post-colonial subjectivity. More than anything, it is this legacy that defines BAFC's principal cinematic project: one dedicated to the production of a transnational post-colonial public sphere. In the metropolis where the group emerged, the dire conditions under which various post-colonial citizens found themselves, their lifeworlds marginalized in relation to the social practices of the majoritarian culture, became the concrete sites of disaffection. In the 1980s, transnational post-colonial practices and discourses reacted in open defiance

against the political crises produced by Thatcherism and Reaganomics, and the hostilities aimed at racial minorities. For British culture, some may point to the Brixton riots of 1981 as the seminal event that broke the dam of repressed post-colonial subjectivities and laid bare the residual animosities between the black British community and empire. The aftermath of the riots produced a rethinking of cultural strategies and unleashed the creative fury of British minorities. The flowering of British cultural studies bolstered by the analytical rigour of Stuart Hall, the rediscovery of the works of the likes of C.L.R. James, the emergence of thinkers such as Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer, the launch of *Third Text* by Rasheed Araeen, and the emergence of Southall Black Sisters among a host of other groups gives an indication of the artistic and intellectual climate under which Black Audio Film Collective was founded and within which it operated.

The collective's key work, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), is a succinct articulation of the dialectic of crisis and difference, and a critical primer – in artistic terms – of transnational post-colonialism. Though *Handsworth Songs* is an analytical essay on the cultural conditions under which young black men and women in Britain lived, and the racist policing tactics directed against them, the film, produced for

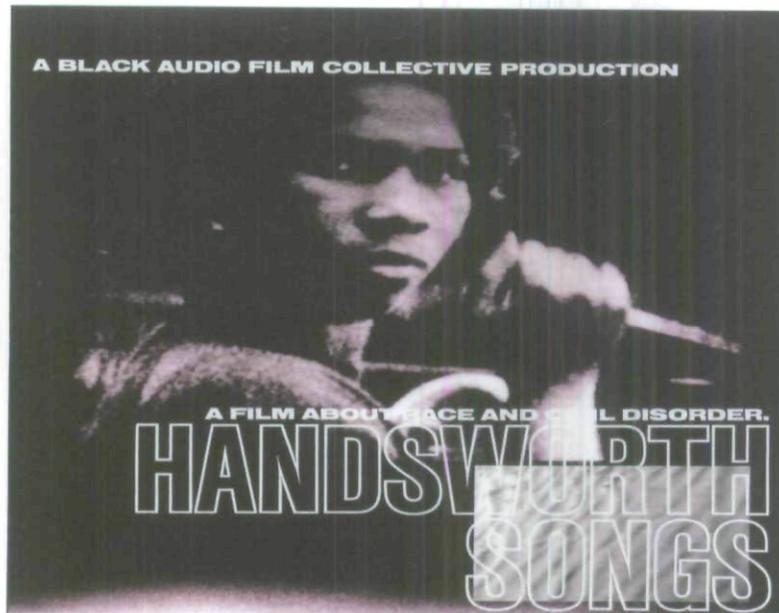


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162. Poster, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

Design: Edward George

163–64. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

Channel Four, did not merely reflect upon the structural violence of Thatcherism. In the aftermath of the protests in Handsworth, the film inhabits a different order of things: it is as much about elsewhere as about Britain. That elsewhere is the broader post-colonial world. This feeling of disjuncture is reflected not only in the jump cuts of the film's narrative discontinuity – moving between archival photographs, newsreel fragments, media reportage, and on-site interviews – it is also deeply anchored by the sombre aural pulse, the disjunctive syncopation of the snare drum beat, the mournful reverb of the dub score that sustains a quiet rage. Though ostensibly addressing the issues of policing, *Handsworth Songs* reflects more

profoundly the agency of the oppressed; it narrates their stories, not purely from the point of view of the event from which it derives its name, but equally through an archaeology of the visual archive of minoritarian dwelling in Britain. As is often the case in BAFC's work, the ghosts of those stories inform the notion of a historically inflected dub cinema whose spatial, temporal and psychic dynamics relays the scattered trajectories of immigrant communities. This is what makes *Handsworth Songs* a classic of 1980s cultural analysis alongside such works as The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies collectively authored *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982) and Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987).

Taken together, BAFC's work from its earliest inception has functioned on the level of archeology through relentless data mining of African and diasporic history. This history represents the black box of BAFC's attempt to formulate a critical account of transnational post-colonialism. In this sense, the work is always an attempt to formulate an advance publicity for its critical models.

### Third Cinema and Proletarian Publicity

To historicise fully the place of Black Audio Film Collective in the discourse of collective practices in the 1980s, and in relation to the dialectic of crisis and difference, we must go beyond Margaret Thatcher's Great Britain to the larger arena of the transnational public sphere. However, it is important to differentiate this public sphere from the bourgeois public sphere<sup>16</sup> theorised by Jürgen Habermas, which is closer to that confronted by the early avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most apposite designation is what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call the proletarian public sphere, by which the agendas



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of the collectives of the 1980s were to make clear their signal ideological differences from the political classes against whom they were aligned. Negt and Kluge specifically deployed the idea of proletarian publicity<sup>17</sup> as the means by which a coalition of the disaffected speak truth to power. *Handsworth Songs* in this context can be described as a work of proletarian publicity. One of its chief attributes is the attempt at an analytical deconstruction of social violence directed at post-colonial subjects in Great Britain. Though influenced by the language of montage, the tradition of creative documentary and the essay films of Chris Marker such as *Sans Soleil* (1982) and *A Grain Without a Cat* (1977) the broader

politics of BAFC's films are based on the dialectical structure of Third Cinema propagated by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas.<sup>18</sup> This alignment with the theory of Third Cinema, focused as it was on the specificity of using cinema as a tool for a collectivised historical project of decolonisation,<sup>19</sup> suggests that BAFC's choice of subject matter can be understood principally through the critical lens of proletarian publicity. The films do not function purely on the grounds of the aesthetic policies of the bourgeois public sphere, but rather they seek to animate the public interest which lies outside it.

What was the cultural climate of the 1980s under which the work of BAFC



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emerged? I will limit myself to two political spheres, the USA and Great Britain, while adding a few examples from Latin America. During this decade a number of artistically significant and politically astute groups emerged in the USA and Great Britain. They became highly visible in the post-civil rights debate on race, gender, identity and class within the institutionalised practices of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations. The rise of these collectives and groups registered the emergence of a new coalition of voices, whose critical and artistic projects of cultural inquiry, documentary humanism, public engagement and radical education joined divergent political forms with theoretical

tools of social deconstruction. This coalition, working independently and interdependently under disparate cultural and historical conditions, reacted to the rise of a new form of conservative political agenda.

In Latin America, where various American-sponsored dictatorships had established police states such as Chile, Nicaragua, Argentina, Honduras and El Salvador, there emerged a range of vigorous oppositional artistic and tactical media groups devoted to long-term liberationist, anti-imperialist principles – groups such as Colectivo Cine Ojo (Chile), Sistema Radio Venceremos (El Salvador), Ukamu Film Collective



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(Bolivia) and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Argentina).<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that the rise of these collectives was precipitated by the crisis that was then growing within the global social imaginary dominated by instruments of neo-liberal capitalism. In this crucial sense the collectives of the 1980s share a similar historical relationship to that which a number of early twentieth-century avant-garde groups such as Dada, die Brücke, der Blaue Reiter, Surrealism, Russian Constructivism, the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude had to the political power of their time.

This development is consonant with an argument that I have elaborated



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elsewhere, namely, that in the modern era artistic and intellectual collectives tend to emerge during moments of crisis.<sup>21</sup> This crisis can be social, cultural, political or economic; however, its effects seem always to generate environments of disillusion and disaffection, leading to a counter challenge by artists.<sup>22</sup> Dada emerged from disaffection with the carnage of the First World War; socialist collectives developed in post-revolution Russia; the Situationist International came out of a search for an alternative to the pervasive mediation of subjectivity and developed trenchant critiques of capital in response to the rise of colonisation of everyday life. Artistic and intellectual collectives make their most persuasive contributions during

times of deep societal transition.

As is clear from the above, the work of these collectives and their attitude towards representation vary from one historical point to another depending on their respective agendas. This is important, since I do not want to give the impression that collectives are always models of political rectitude and are therefore always progressive in each given field of engagement. Some are not overtly political while others are. They can be artistic or intellectual or a combination of both. Recent examples include Multiplicity, a Milan-based group focusing on questions of border conflict in Europe and Retort, based in the San Francisco

165–66. Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*, 1982

167. Chris Marker, *A Grain Without a Cat*, 1977

Bay area, which describes itself as an 'antagonist of capital and empire' and whose influential book *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, offers a pessimistic diagnosis of the present state of world politics. A fundamental part of Retort's work is an attempt to recuperate the intellectual legacy of groups such as the Situationist International. A common thread can be observed among these coalitions of forces, namely a critical disaffection with the prevailing order of things and the entrenchment of institutional values that provides no new avenues within which disparate and even antagonistic interlocutors can match wits with each other.



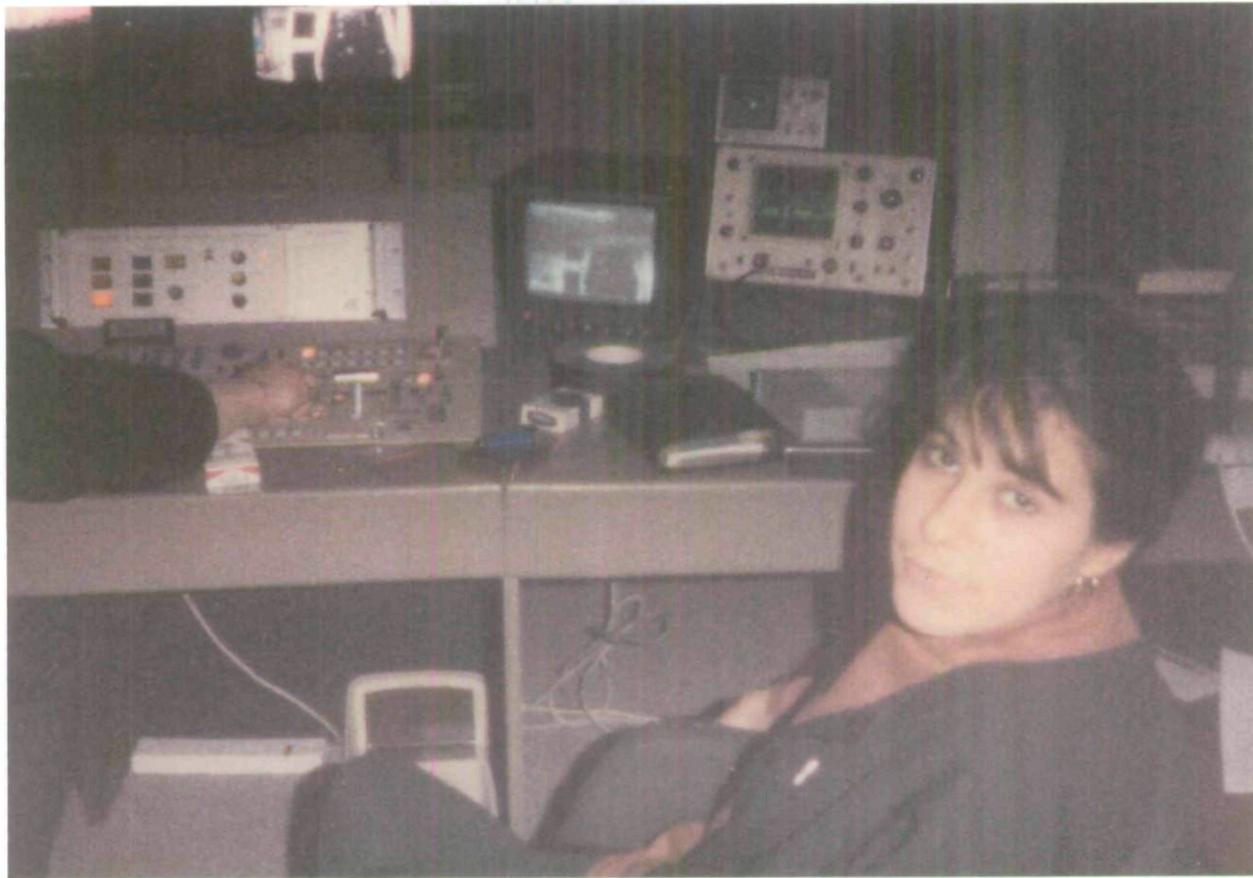
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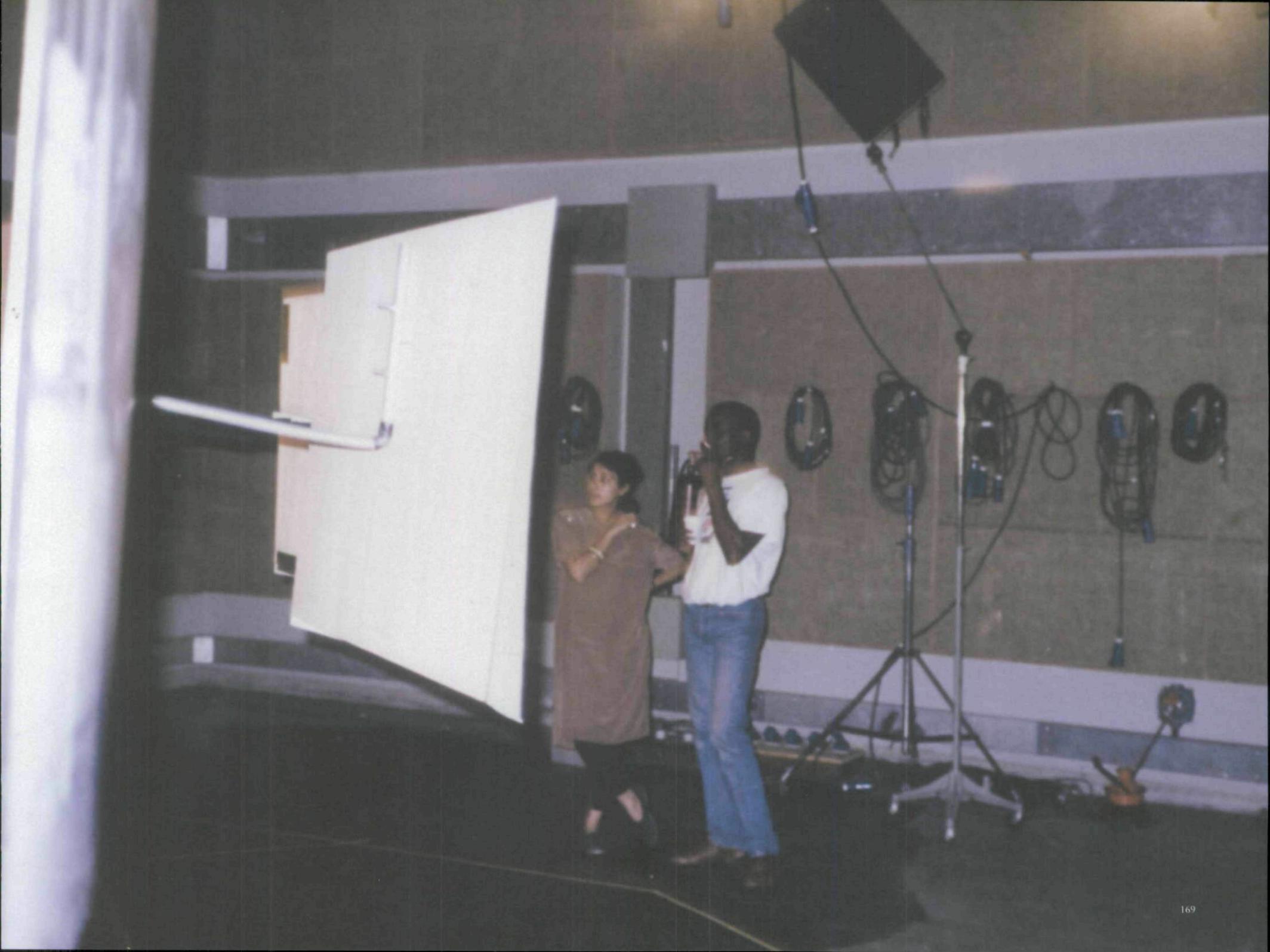
To understand the remarkable historical trajectory out of which the film practices of the Black Audio Film Collective developed one would have to look at some of the profound but competing ideological positions of a number of historical avant-garde groups and contemporary collectives. As I have tried to show, on one side of this equation are the aesthetics derived from early twentieth-century European avant-gardes based on the principle of artistic collectivity. On the other is the historical and philosophical alliance BAFC developed in line with Pan-African avant-garde groups such as the Negritude movement and the Harlem Renaissance group. These strategies converge in shaping

the contemporary film language of the group, in its interest in projects of historical deconstruction, but above all on a cinema based on an ethics of transnational post-colonialism.

## Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, New York: Grove Press, 1967.
2. In his recent book *Prosthetic Gods*, Cambridge, MA: October Books and MIT Press, 2004, critic and art historian Hal Foster begins the first section, 'Primitive Scenes', by attributing the early rupture within modernism to Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* and the relationship between the primitive and modern. The title of Fanon's book is the inverse of the landmark and foundational work of twentieth-century modernism, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which is made up of nothing but black masks and white skin. Foster's attempt is significant, even if, in typical art historical fashion, it did little to confront the legacy of Harlem Renaissance artists such as Lois Mailou Jones and those of Negritude in the articulation of the dialectic between the primitive and the modern.
3. See Mari Carmen Ramirez, 'Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960–1980', in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, ed. Luis Camitner, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999, pp. 52–71.
4. See my essay 'Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on "African" Conceptualism', in Camitner, Farver and Weiss, eds, *Global Conceptualism*, pp. 111–12.
5. Kellie Jones, 'It's not Enough to Say "Black is Beautiful": Abstraction at the Whitney, 1969–1974', in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer, London and Cambridge, MA: INIVA and MIT Press, 2006, p. 155.
6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2004.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
8. See Ramirez, 'Tactics for Thriving on Adversity', p. 68.
9. The workshops, connected as they were to leftist and labour movements, suggest solidarity with the values and aspirations of the working class.
10. John Akomfrah, 'Black Independent Film-making: A Statement by the Black Audio/Film Collective', *Artrage: Inter-Cultural Arts Magazine*, Summer 1983, p. 29.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London: Verso, 2002.
14. See, for instance, Salman Rushdie's screed 'Handsworth Songs', published in response to Black Audio Film Collective's film of the same name in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–91*, London: Granta Books, 1992, pp. 115–17.
15. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, especially the seminal essay 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism', pp. 66–84.
16. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
17. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
18. See the influential manifesto by the directors of the film *Hour of Furnaces*, Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World', in *Movies and Methods. An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols, Phoenix, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1976, pp. 44–64.
19. It might be important to link the themes of a decolonising cinema from the point of view of Third Cinema with Guy Debord's critique of spectacle in relation to what he calls the 'colonization of everyday life'. Debord's critique of spectacle as such has imbricated within it a programme of decolonising everyday experience from the rapacity of capital as the chief medium of spectacle.
20. For a thorough review of the kind of work being undertaken in Latin America during the 1980s see Coco Fusco, *Reviewing Histories: Selections from New Latin American Cinema*, Buffalo, NY: Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, 1987. This seminal book is an important contribution to the range of collective practices that were part of the global vanguard of the 1980s.
21. See my essay, 'The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis', in *Empires, Ruins, and Networks*, ed. Nikos Papastergiadis, Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 2005.

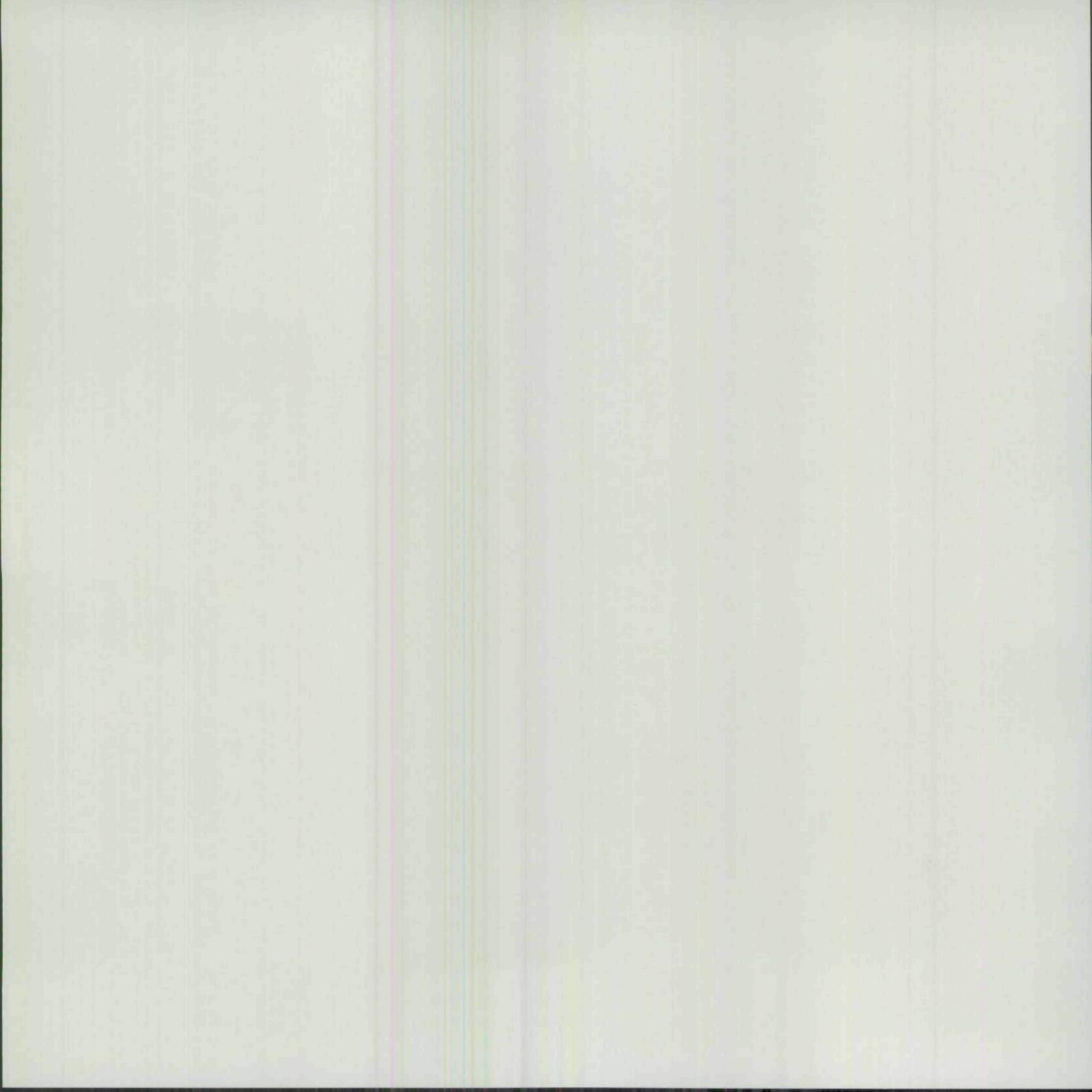






168. Lina Gopaul, editing *Handsworth Songs*, 1986
169. Lina Gopaul, John Akomfrah, Polytechnic of Central London studio, *Handsworth Songs* shoot, 1986
170. David Lawson, Lina Gopaul, Ridley Road, London 1986
171. Avril Johnson, John Akomfrah, press conference for *Testament*, FESPACO Pan-African Film Festival, Burkina Faso, 1989
172. John Akomfrah, press conference for *Testament*, FESPACO Pan-African Film Festival, Burkina Faso, 1989







## AN ABSENCE OF RUINS

JOHN AKOMFRAH  
IN CONVERSATION  
WITH KODWO ESHUN

**KODWO ESHUN:** We both attended *Documenta 11* in 2002; it was striking to see the ways in which *Handsworth Songs*, which was installed in the Kulturbahnhof, resonated with the present. There are certain signatures in the work of that era which communicate to us now, obliquely, from a far off time. So, I would like to open our dialogue by asking you about your sense of the 1980s. In retrospect, what, for you and the other artists of the Black Audio Film Collective, was a defining moment in terms of the cultural landscape of the 1980s?

**JOHN AKOMFRAH:** As with all of these things, when you are asked to name a moment, you remember things which are disparate and which are sometimes not connected. So, in my case, there are a number of moments, some personal, some intellectual, some political. I will name as many of them as I can. The Pan-African Black Art Conventions of the early 1980s, when I first encountered the artists Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney and Claudette Johnson would be one. The multiple arguments with the Arts Council when we first left Portsmouth in 1982, over whether or not what we did could be considered avant-garde, that would be another. The attempt to try and finally register as a Collective, when it became clear that we were not going to make it,



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culturally, on our own, as individual film-makers, would be another. The sense that somehow the group of people I'd met in the mid-1970s, Lina Gopaul, Reece Auguiste, Avril Johnson, Trevor Mathison, Edward George, David Lawson, people with whom I went through all the major political events in further education in the mid-70s, who were prepared to make the shift to a cultural politics, and were prepared to give up their own individual courses of action to pursue that project, that would be another. But, for me, I suppose the defining moment would be the disturbances of 1981. That seems to me, in retrospect, major. I have spent a long time trying to resist reducing what we did to a major political event, because I thought that, in a way, there was a sort of determinism there that underscored several ideas that were in currency at the time. You know, every time you spoke to somebody about any kind of black art, they would say, 'Oh well, it all started in 81.' It seemed to reduce it to that moment.

**KE:** You are referring to the riots in Brixton in 1981, and also in Toxteth, Liverpool.

**JA:** Yes, Liverpool and Brixton, for me, were major, partly because they seemed to,

for the first time, in my case anyway, register something that you felt, viscerally and intellectually, which was that there was a gap between official discourses on race and what we knew. By 'we', I mean, my generation, the people who grew up and came of age in 1976. The events of 1981 seemed to mark a rupture with the official discourses on race. I would say that 1981 marked a break in the politics of representation, that took people like me three or four years to digest. So, that, by 1985, when civil disturbances started again, you seemed to have done the research, the psychic research for that project.

**KE:** I think one important idea that emerges when one looks back on that moment of the mid-to-late 1980s is that artists became concerned with questions of memory, that they become discontented with, to put it crudely, the normative languages around history, heritage, nationality and memorialisation. The questions of memory and duration then emerged as key sites of aesthetic engagement. I think of the Collective's work as a sustained engagement with questions of memory. Could we connect that preoccupation to Foucault's ideas of counter-memory which were being mobilised by artists and theorists at the time? Formally speaking, the idea that memory existed partially, and

fragmentarily, meant that one's formal language had to take account of these gaps. You could not present the fullness of memory; you had to invoke the interruptions and those interruptions spoke as eloquently as the speech, the silences became as important as the voices. This was a question of the form of politics and the politics of form and this articulation came to the fore very much throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Perhaps these questions might coalesce around the notion of archive. One notion that emerges in *Handsworth Songs* is the poetic reworking of the archive, the slowing down of the image, the address of voice-over, and the mixed feelings one experienced in the presence of this reconfiguration of the archive. I wonder if you could elaborate on the implications of that moment of revisiting the archive.

**JA:** For us, the project was always a kind of investment in memory. The return to the archive was indisputably, in our case, connected with a return to the inventory of black presences in this country. The investment in memory, I would say, took two distinct forms. It seemed to me that, at the time, all projects around the notion of memory had to deal with two things, the question of presence and, obviously, by implication, the question of absence. In the case of the black archive, the question of presence had

to do with the fact that official memory denied you a certain kind of intimacy and solitude. You know, when you watched those newsreels, they seemed to not even be about people, they seemed to be about statistics. You know, 'Oh, here come the darkies. . . '— I know you hate that word, but it is appropriate in this case — 'coming off the boat,'—it just seemed to lack any understanding that the people you were looking at, people of colour, might have a trajectory that was not just to do with them being a statistic. On the other hand, there were also crucial absences that one had to deal with, and some of them were even to do with the ellipses of our own kind of languages. I remember listening to Howlin' Wolf, to his famous song about the .44 pistol with that lyric: 'I've worn my .44 so long, it's made my finger sore.' And you are listening to it and you think, 'Well, why is this guy angry? What the hell is he angry about?' Because what is animating the song is actually not present in the song itself. And so much of what constituted black presence was also underscored and overdetermined by these massive absences. So that was one thing. The second thing about the memory was that it seemed to get us out of a number of possible cul-de-sacs. If you were educated formally in the mid-to-late 1970s, at the time when postmodern orthodoxies were at their height, one of the things you noticed more and more was that people would say things like, 'Oh well, this is about trying to avoid inferiority'. In other words, there was

a sort of hostility to the question of identity itself, which became crystallised around a hostility to what people call identity politics. And you realise that we could not do that. We did not have the luxury to be hostile to a question of identity because our very moment of becoming is tied to the question and the politics of identity. You could not avoid it. So, the notion of memory was a way of sidestepping some of what you might call the implications of the formalisms of certain practices. You needed it as a kind of corrective gesture to the Lacanian delusional orthodoxies, which were the ones which we were being given as the way forward, theoretically. But the idea of memory also seemed to me a way of posing questions to what one might call the official discourse. Because the official discourse insisted on narrativising black lives as migrant lives, insisted on treating black subjectivity as simply either criminal or pathological or sociological; there always seemed to be a category which came before you could get to that identity. And the recourse to memory was, for us, a way of sidestepping that. It was not simply about going back to the past because, clearly, what we were talking about was trying to secure legitimacy for present subjectivities. But you needed to question the way in which those subjectivities were positioned in several discourses of governmentality in order to just be able to get to the new, the now. So, that was the importance of memory, for me.

**KE:** I am interested in the complicated poetics of that turn to memory. Certainly *Handsworth Songs* retains the sense that a certain kind of formalism has a real importance. And my sense is that the possibilities of rupture entailed by certain kinds of formalism are important for diasporic artists, and yet remain largely overlooked, remain somewhat difficult to talk about. I would be interested to think through the Collective's preoccupation with the formal. There is a moment in *Handsworth Songs* which is fascinating, because it occurs almost off-camera, as it were, that relates to this idea. There is a sequence in which a local meeting is staged in order to be televised and you hear the producers talking about capturing images of the audience and one producer in the control room says to the other something along the lines of 'You know, it's looking a bit dark at the front' and he is talking about darkness as a technical problem, as a failure in legibility. And then the other producer on the studio floor responds by saying 'Well, that's because there's all these black people sitting at the front.' So, you get this weird moment where a technical problem immediately becomes a racialised problem that immediately becomes a spatial question, a question of presence; all of these matters are conflated. Here you begin to see the ways in which the technical, the formal and the spatial entangle each other in a way that is difficult to pull apart and resolve. And one of the notions that BAFC proposed, although it is under-remarked, is



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that one had to intervene in the film medium itself. Film as such was not neutral. One had to enter into the medium of film stock and intervene in technical questions such as colour correction, filtering, lighting, the whole field of what is called sensitometry, the whole question of the sensitivity of light to skin. These are not identitarian questions, they are technological and formal questions of embodiment whose resonance is political and spatial. So a technical question begins to resonate uncomfortably with questions of social oppression. I am very interested in the project of intervention at the level of the technical and its relation to the social dimension of form.

**JA:** Talking about *Handsworth Songs* and that sequence, it is interesting how much that crystallised a certain kind of obsession. I remember doing an interview with Coco Fusco in which I said something that got me into more trouble than anything else. I said the questions that animate what we do are not formal but emotional ones. And people were, like, 'God, what an anti-intellectual thing to say.' But it was not that, at all. There was a sort of tyranny of the image that forced the kind of convergence that you are talking about in *Handsworth Songs*. Let me give you an example. There used to be a programme when I was growing up called *Police Five*, which was presented by a man



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called Shaw Taylor. And you would sit down and this programme would come on, and I used to pray—it was not just me, I had three brothers, and we used to sit there praying that the mugger he was going to name was not black. Because you knew what was going to happen the next day. You just knew this was going to be a major point. So, there was a certain kind of tyranny which overdetermined our lives, that came via the image, which forced you to have both a theoretical, an emotional and a philosophical approach to images. And that was really all I was trying to access in saying these questions were more than just formal ones. Everyone accepts that a certain kind of crisis of authority inaugurated European modernism, and everyone accepts that that crisis of authority was not simply formal, even though the implications were formal, with Cubism and so on. But no one ever extends us that courtesy. At the time, anyway, now it is commonplace, but, at the time, it was not, people would just come up to you and say, 'Oh, go on, tell it as it is' as if the way to the form was unproblematic, and it certainly was not. Once you have accepted that there is a regime of truth that you were, in some ways, trying to get beyond, there was then the question of what you did, and that was an emotional, a philosophical and a technical problem. So, there we were with a camera, trying to document, trying to find a language for a process which was itself trying to find a language, if you know what I mean. And it struck me that, actually, what

we were dealing with was not simply individual questions, they were almost generational. In other words, the recourse to form, to the formal, and the recourse to trying to find a way in which one could get the form, to, if you like, obey certain other questions, seemed almost a precondition to becoming, for my generation.

**KE:** If we could hold that sense of a generational concern with form and then move with it until we get to the early-to-mid-1990s, we might find ourselves navigating a slightly reconfigured landscape. Questioning the limits of the documentary image, questioning the limits of factuality, as Black Audio did, meant that you necessarily raised the question of the fictionality of the document. So, by the early-to-mid-1990s, the group, as artists, had developed a sustained engagement with the fictional, with questions of the organisation of character, more mainstream questions, in a way. I want to play devil's advocate and ask you if that concern animated a desire to become more populist in your approach? Perhaps a more productive way of thinking through what happened at this time might be to suggest that, in England, there was a feeling that the experimental or the art film, however we define it, had moved from the arena of the international festival film circuit, and certainly from terrestrial broadcast television, into the gallery which now

became a kind of black cube. So, there begins to emerge the idea that a certain kind of speculative cinema had died, in the theatrical sense, and had been reborn inside the white cube. In the British context, you have an artist such as Steve McQueen who is indebted to a cinematographic imaginary, and who then becomes emblematic of the idea that the black cube is the zone where experimentation with the moving image has now moved to. I wonder how you situated the 1990s, which now appears suspended between the kind of envy that the art space has for cinema, at the same time as it disavows cinema. It says, on one hand that cinema is dead, but, on the other hand, it says, cinema lives here, in the gallery. I wonder how you positioned yourself in terms of that changing landscape.

**JA:** The distinction between art and film, gallery and cinema was never a watertight one for us. Because, of course, most of the early work that we did at Black Audio, between 1982 and 1985, that is, the two mammoth tape/slide projects, *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality*, were created specifically for the gallery and were created by deploying the aid of the cinematographic apparatus. We thought very seriously about the question of montage, we thought very seriously about the question of colour, and also very clearly

about the construction of a kind of narrative with stills, about the ways in which a narrative might be created out of blocks of frames. So we were there, in the early 1980s. I think what is different now is that I am quite happy for the work to travel in whichever way it wants to go, because, actually, the questions which animate it are not just televisual ones. I remember sitting in a conference organised in New York in the mid-1990s, when Edward Kamau Brathwaite presented this incredible work that literally brought me to tears; he read this long poem which was just an invocation of different moments of becoming, in the diaspora. So, he named places, he named dates. And it was this invocation of our presence, via recourse to time and dates and places, that was just so moving. And you suddenly realised, at the end of it, 'Yes, actually, this is the project all along. This is what we have been trying to do all along.' I mean, on the one hand, you have, from the beginning, the work of people like Derek Walcott, who was very important for what we did. I mean, Derek Walcott's notion of the diaspora being organised around an absence of ruins, that phrase in itself, that suggestive phrase, helped so much to try and define what you did in the absence of ruins, in securing identities. And the fact that – and I know these two are not supposed to be the same at all – but the fact that you could hear Brathwaite, if you like, allow us an alternative narrative, not a cinematic one but an alternative narrative, through which

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Ridley Road, 1989

stories of becoming could be brought into public space, seemed to me to justify what we have to continue to do, which is – and when I say ‘we’, I mean myself and the people I work with – which is to resist the idea that what we do has to be fixed by the end, by where it arrives, be it television, the gallery, the cinema. I mean, I am not, on one level, interested in the arrival points, I am much more interested in the process by which we access these counter-memories, if you like. Does that answer your question?

**KE:** Yes, it begins to answer it. It explains how one continues to function, how one continues to pursue an ongoing project, to experiment with life, while, around one, the landscape itself is changing. I mean, the change from Black Audio Film Collective to Black Audio Films to Smoking Dog Films in retrospect feels very much a continuation of the same concerns. But Smoking Dog’s work has not received the close attention and the critical analysis that the work of Black Audio has and I think that is because critical energy has been directed towards the narrative that I outlined. It has moved towards the gallery world. And that is why *Documenta 11*, which is where we started our conversation, was so moving to me because it was a moment where you saw British artists, such as yourselves, but also others such as Cerith Wyn Evans and Zarina

Bhimji all positioned in an internationalist frame. So a context was created in which a YBA narrative did not become, once again, the single, overarching account of the present which was to be exported for market. So, that brings us up to the present moment. I wondered what you thought of a statement that Kobena Mercer made in which he characterised our moment, the one that we live in now, as ‘an era of multicultural normalisation, in which diversity is increasingly administered as a social and cultural norm in postmodernity’. Mercer went on to say that contemporary artists no longer feel responsible for constructing Afrodiasporic presence as an object of knowledge in the global market of multicultural commodity fetishism. I take it that the term cultural diversity itself is a bureaucratic term for the management of cultural difference, however that is to be organised. What Kobena Mercer points out is that, if institutions appear to have taken that on, artists are now obliged to adopt quite distinct strategies to navigate the present. Would you agree with Kobena’s characterisation of the era that we live in now?

**JA:** Yes, I agree with him. I think, in a way, if I had to distinguish, myself, between how I and my colleagues worked before, and the way we work now, I would say that I am



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much more concerned with what the work itself has to say about certain questions. Whereas, in the 1980s and most of the 1990s, we were much more preoccupied with trying to contribute to a broader cultural debate about black identity or cultural politics. Because I find that, in a way, that interest is the way in which we could respond to certain questions. The recourse to memory, or now countermemory, is still part of trying to, in some way, contribute to a palimpsest of national identity. And, in writing that, you will have to resort to gestures and narratives which, at their base, are raciological. Now, I do not see that as a problem, providing that is the focus. As for Kobena's point about multicultural normality; yes, in a way, we were trying to respond directly to that but on the other hand, that is not what animates what we do. Having said that, the normality is to be accepted, because we won, you know, we won. We made certain arguments, and they are now, you know, hegemonic. We won. The question is, what next? I do not think we should accept the victory as a kind of restriction even though it might seem to be for some people. The regimes of truth I was talking about trying to get beyond earlier were the ones which have determined black lives, as I understood them, in the 1980s. It is not true to say that normalisation is always a part of regimes of truth. There was a certain kind of normalised sense of what constituted a black identity, multiple or otherwise, in the 1980s. One should not be worried about normalisation

since normalisation is the norm, as it were. When one is faced with these moments, one has to remind oneself what it was that one was trying to do. We were trying to find and legitimise new versions of becoming, which were not aberrant. The fact that you had to do it within a certain liminal space did not mean that you wanted that identity to be marginal. In other words, the place of speech need not necessarily be the place of identity, and that was always very clear for us. Those new versions of becoming, which are really part of the four-century battle to secure our humanity, to continue to widen the vocabulary of what constitutes the human, seemed to me to resort to a variety of languages. And some of those are raciological. And in the process of using that language, it is clear that some will become mainstream. Now, does that then mean that the project itself is over? Well, clearly not. You only have to look at the ways in which ideas about black masculinity continue to circulate in our culture to know that the project is not over. You only have to look at the ways in which certain official discourses continue to criminalise and pathologise certain black identities to know that the struggle is not over. So, we need to make separations here, either in the language, or what we are describing as the language, in order to move on. There is still work to be done. And, as Robert Frost said, there are miles to go before we sleep.

Edited from *Foundations: The Birth of Memory*, dialogue on Day 2 of *A Free State* Conference, Decibel, Arts Council England, The British Museum, March 19th 2004



## INTRODUCTION TO ARTISTS' WRITINGS KODWO ESHUN & ANJALIKA SAGAR

From the outset, the artists of the Black Audio Film Collective placed a great emphasis on the dimension of the discursive. The group engaged in the formulation of theories, propositions, statements, positions, hypotheses, interventions, speculations, dialogues, debates and conversations, which, in their entirety, constituted a series of critical perspectives that sought to inaugurate a discursive space for an independent culture of the moving image. This insistence upon reflection, upon inquiry and upon questioning led the group to form alliances across and between the spaces of the artistic and the political while simultaneously engaging in intensive debates with international avant-gardes from Britain, America, West Africa, Canada and India. In their different ways, Akomfrah, Auguiste, Gopaul, George and Johnson were artists who wrote statements and presented papers; the exception to this investment in the discursive was Mathison who always preferred to draw or sketch or compose than write; and Lawson whose energies were focused on marketing, distribution and public relations.

The group positioned themselves as public intellectuals engaged in the assembly of and participation in the formation of a critical public sphere, configured from exhibitions, forums, screenings, conferences and symposiums, disseminated through anthologies, journals

and magazines. Indeed, one of the pleasures of the BAFC film is the witnessing of the staging of a body of thought, the enactment of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the bodily hexis', that is the 'durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking' through the formal setting of the studio interview; the appearances and the narration of authors, artists and activists such as Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Greg Tate, Robin D.G. Kelley, Homi Bhabha, Meera Syal, Paul Gilroy, Gareth Pierce, Toni Cade Bambara, Rozina Visram, Coco Fusco, Jan Carew, Tricia Rose and Thulani Davis across the Collective's films and videos constitute a cinema of the intellectual imagination that is unparalleled in contemporary culture.

The selected and edited writings of BAFC fall into two sections of published and unpublished writings. The former texts were published in journals such as *Ten: 8* or *Undercut* or magazines such as *Artrage* that are now either inoperative or remain difficult to access. The latter constitute a cross-section of writings from the BAFC archive that indicate the distinctive styles of address mobilised by the group. Often presented at major conferences and then reworked for subsequent publication, these texts provide a valuable insight into each artist's theoretical intervention, the enunciation of a group statement and a window into a bitterly contested

historical moment. Thus Auguiste's texts 'Black Independents and Third Cinema: The British Context' (1989) and 'Black Cinema, Poetics and New World Aesthetics' (1988) and Johnson's 'Identity' (1989) sought to stake out much-needed space within film aesthetics, cinema histories and the space of representation. Gopaul's 'Which Way Forward?' (1985) and George's 'New Directions in Training' (1985) constituted interventions at the level of policy. Akomfrah's 'On the Borderline' (1992) and George's 'Reflections of the Black Experience' (1986) were intended as meditations on contemporary photography that revealed the formal preoccupations of the group with questions of figuration and contexts of museology while the Collective's 'Expeditions: On Race and Nation' (1991) was presented as a photowork that emerged from and extended the form of *Expeditions*, their epic tape-slide work. A late work such as George's '(ghost the signal)' (1997) revealed his characteristic interest in fictional histories and the production of fabulation. Previously unpublished writings such as Auguiste's 'Twilight: Auker's World' (1988), Gopaul and Akomfrah's 'Colour Symbolism in Ghanaian Society' (1989), Akomfrah's 'On Writing *Who Needs A Heart*' (1991) and 'Notations of Collective Inventions for *Who Needs A Heart*' (1991) indicate the process of intensive research and extensive rewriting from which each work eventually emerged.

**1 JOHN AKOMFRAH, Black Independent Film-making: A Statement by the Black Audio/Film Collective (1983)**

The first public statement of the Black Audio Film Collective, published in *Artrage Intercultural Arts* magazine in 1983; the London-based magazine functioned as the hub of the national independent black art scene throughout the 1980s. This text epitomised Akomfrah's role as the spokesperson of the group; of the seven founders, it was Akomfrah who took the most pleasure in articulating the public position of the group and situating the group project within the broad field of cineculture.

**2 LINA GOPAUL, Which Way Forward? (1985)**

Presented by Lina Gopaul for the 'Which Way Forward?' conference at the National Film Theatre, London in 1985. The conference hosted debates about the future directions of the grant-aided workshop movement in a post Greater London Council context. The 'Which Way Forward?' paper captured Gopaul in her role as the strategist of the Collective; Gopaul was a Maoist-inspired militant more interested in the political economy and foundational legacies of black film culture for generations to come than the pursuit of an auteurist film career or an engagement with the art sector as defined by the gallery system. This text is published here for the first time.

**3 EDWARD GEORGE, New Directions in Training (1985)**

BAFC were one of the most active participants of the eight workshops that constituted the Association of Black Workshops. In 'New Directions in Training', George gave a stringent account of the group's integrated practice, itemising the successes and shortcomings of their film familiarisation and training courses and locating both within the structured inequality and institutional racism endemic to the media, art and cultural sectors of 1980s Britain. This text is published here for the first time.

**4 EDWARD GEORGE, Introduction to Reflections of the Black Experience (1986)**

First published as the catalogue essay for *Reflections of the Black Experience*, a major group exhibition of ten contemporary British Asian, African and Caribbean photographers that included work by David Lewis, Ingrid Pollard and Sunil Gupta; curated by Monika Baker and presented at the Brixton Art Gallery, it was commissioned by the Race Equality Unit of the soon to be abolished Greater London Council as part of a London-wide cultural programme entitled, somewhat simplistically, *The Black Experience*. Edward George's interests in questions of desire, figuration and sexualities successfully complicated the exhibition's positivist brief.

Looking back on the exhibition in his monograph *Pictures from Here* (2003) Gupta wrote that ten photographers were invited 'to contribute 10 photographs each... The project brought photographers out of the woodwork and together for the first time... under the umbrella of the GLC' (Sunil Gupta, *Pictures from Here*, Autograph/Boot, 2003, pp. 32–33).

**5 REECE AUGUISTE, Black Cinema, Poetics and New World Aesthetics (1988)**

First presented at the 'Cultural Identities' conference, held at the Commonwealth Institute, Kensington, London in March 1986, published in *Undercut*, 17, Spring 1998 and republished in *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists Film and Video*, ed. Nina Danino and Michael Maziere, Wallflower Press, 2003, pp. 154–56. Auguiste presented his paper in the fourth and final panel of the conference entitled 'Aesthetics and Politics: Working on Two Fronts'. Other speakers included Martina Attile, Peter Gidal, Isaac Julien and Mandy Merck. Auguiste was influenced by poetry and the non-fiction essays of Wilson Harris and Elias Canetti as much as by cinema; he specialised in position papers that cleared a discursive space for the group's complex practice. Auguiste and Gidal disagreed over the disruptive potential of desire within a theory of cinema; and the event as a whole evokes the sense of restricted space for theoretical movement

that BAFC insisted upon; it is in this context that Auguiste, in his Introduction to the panel, written after the event, stressed the ways in which 'we are struggling to construct and articulate a politics that can begin to address, in cinema, the complexities of post-colonial existence in the already troubled terrain of postmodernism' (*Undercut Reader*, p. 153). Looking back on the event, Danino noted that the 'Cultural Identities' conference constituted 'the first time black and white filmmakers, critics and theorists from different cultural backgrounds came together in a series of film screenings and discussions... where vocabulary is being formulated and the agenda to some extent is being contested and negotiated', (*Undercut Reader*, pp. 130–31).

**6 REECE AUGUISTE, Handsworth Songs: Some Background Notes (1988)**

First published in *Framework* 41, Auguiste's text functioned as a response to the reception accorded *Handsworth Songs* in reviews, and subsequent letters, published in *The Guardian* by Salman Rushdie, Stuart Hall and Darcus Howe, in the political journal *Race Today* by journalist Michael Cadette and in Tony Sewell's review for *The Voice*, London's popular Caribbean tabloid, and as an introduction to the interview between Auguiste, Akomfrah, Gopaul and George and sociologist Paul Gilroy and film researcher Jim Pines

published in the same issue of *Framework*. *Handsworth Songs* had broken with the expectations not just of white television documentary and white avant-garde film practice but, equally, with the obligations of black film practice; these bad-tempered arguments across widely differing sections of the British mediascape attested to the degree to which BAFC had offended the mainstream black British norms of *The Voice*, the putatively radical black British norms of *Race Today* and the liberal Asian fictional norms of Salman Rushdie; it is from within this embattled context that this text emerged.

**7 REECE AUGUISTE, Twilight: Auker's World (1988)**

One of several treatments written by Reece Auguiste that would form the basis for what would eventually become *Twilight City* (1989). The third version, published here for the first time, reveals Auguiste's close reading of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) as well as Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (1985). Most pertinent to this text, however, were the recent events of Monday October 19, 1987, or Black Monday, in which the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell calamitously, precipitating percentage declines in the Hong Kong, UK, Australia, US and Canada stock markets.

**8 AVRIL JOHNSON, Identity (1989)**

Presented on April 7, 1989, at the National Identities Conference on Feminism, Representation and Identities England, attended by Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson. Johnson studied psychology at Portsmouth and retained an acute sense of the mutual ambivalences of the collective project. Her elegantly posed paper reflected on the implications and imperatives of group nomination, pointing to the expectations and entanglements that the Collective's invocation of raciality mobilised; in doing so, she anticipated points raised in the early twenty-first century by curator Thelma Golden. This text is published here for the first time.

**9 REECE AUGUISTE / BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE, Black Independents and Third Cinema: The British Context (1989)**

First presented at the 1986 Edinburgh Television Festival and published in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Paul Willemen and Jim Pines, London: British Film Institute, 1989, pp. 212–17. Mercer's text, 'A Third Cinema at Edinburgh: Reflections on a Pioneering Event', *Screen*, 26(5), Autumn 1986, provides an insight into the immediate context in which Auguiste negotiates the insufficiencies of Third Cinema for the present, seeking to establish a degree of singularity that cannot be subsumed by the simple invocation of cinecultural legacy, no matter how radical.

**10 JOHN AKOMFRAH,  
Colour Symbolism in Ghanaian Society  
(1989)**

This interview was conducted between John Akomfrah and Lina Gopaul at the BAFC office in October 1989, upon the Collective's completion of the location shoot of *Testament* in Ghana. Akomfrah's archaeology of colour symbolism offered a perspective which complicates the film's already complex chromatic register. This text is published here for the first time.

**11 BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE,  
Expeditions: On Race and Nation (1991)**

Edited by George from texts contributed by Akomfrah, Gopaul, George, Johnson, Auguste and Joseph. First published in *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, ed. Susan Hiller, London/New York: Routledge, 1991, from papers presented at a seminar on primitivism hosted by Hiller at the Slade School of Art throughout 1989–1990. In its initial publication, *Expeditions* was presented as a photowork in which details selected from the slide-tape epics *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality* were counterpointed by text comprised of group writing and quotations from the archives of imperial governance. *Expeditions* exemplified the group's preoccupation with the literary form of the inventory which allowed them to focus on epistemic shifts while simultaneously charting wider genealogies of becoming.

**12 JOHN AKOMFRAH, On Writing  
Who Needs A Heart (1991)**

Akomfrah reflects upon the process through which the biographical imperative is rejected in favour of a writing attentive to a life understood as trace and as enigma. The notion of a cinema of transparency is displaced in favour of a cinema of impressions and opacity that is subtle enough to capture the invention of gestures that we take for granted. The single 'master script' is replaced by a proliferation of writings, by Akomfrah, by George, by the actors. This text is published here for the first time.

**13 JOHN AKOMFRAH, Notations  
of Collective Inventions for  
Who Needs A Heart (1991)**

In the absence of a script for *Who Needs A Heart*, the actors could not rehearse their roles but were obliged instead to invent them in response to each other, to interior spaces, to Akomfrah's presentations on the cultural politics of the 1960s and to the wide range of music selected and played during three weeks of workshop sessions. In this light, these texts might be understood not as footnotes to an already decided process but rather as notations of a collective process of fabulation; Akomfrah likened this methodology and its outcome to that of Wong Kar Wai's workshops undertaken for his film *Chungking Express* (1994). This text is published here for the first time.

**14 JOHN AKOMFRAH,  
On the Borderline (1992)**

First published in *Ten: 8* in 1992 in response to the British debut of work by American photographer Lyle Ashton Harris. 'On the Borderline' extended Akomfrah's long-standing interest in photography, which paralleled George's 'Reflections' essay and the group's interest in the work of Rodchenko, Burke, Fani-Kayode, vanDerZee, Horsfield and others. 'On the Borderline' sets its speculations within the figure of the imaginary museum, the space of installation that recurred throughout the Collective's films from the neutral space of *Handsworth Songs* to the 'Museum of Dread' in *Mysteries of July*, anticipating the trope of the museological in the work of Meshac Gaba.

**15 EDWARD GEORGE,  
(ghost the signal) (1997)**

First published in German in *Loving the Alien: Science Fiction, Diaspora, Multikultur*, ed. Dieterich Dietrichsen, ID Verlag, 1997. George presented an early version for the 'Loving the Alien' conference, held at the Volksbühne, Berlin, in September 1997. Other participants at 'Loving the Alien' included the critics Dietmar Dath, Mark Dery, Kodwo Eshun, Paul Gilroy and Greg Tate, music producer Skiz Fernando and the artist Renee Green. To coincide with the conference, German music magazine *Spex* published a special edition dedicated

to the same matrix of concerns. Dietrichsen conceived the conference after watching *The Last Angel of History* which had a major impact upon German critics, influencing Dietmar Dath, Tobias Nagl, Christoph Spehr, Barbara Kirchner, Ulf Poschardt's *DJ Culture* (1998), Ruth Mayer's *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalisation* (2002) and *Hellblau* (2001), Thomas Meinecke's novel which includes a scene in which characters attend the 'Loving the Alien' conference. George's inventory of musicality as a space of alterity epitomises his interest in speculative mode of writing. The text was translated from German by Angelika Welt and was untranslated into English by Edward George.

The area of black independent film-making will soon see the growth of a number of workshops established with the specific aim of catering for black film needs. We will also see a growth in the number of films made by members of these workshops. As in any other field of cultural activity and practice such a development calls for collective debate and discussion. Some of the important issues to be raised will be around the relationship between the workshop organisers and participants in the course. The others should obviously be about the nature and structure of the courses themselves.

Prior to this debate, however, is the task of accounting for the specificity of black independent film-making. What, after all, does 'black independent film-making' mean when present film culture is a largely white affair? And does this posture of independence presuppose a radical difference of film orientation? If this is the case how does one work within this difference?

The Black Audio Film Collective has chosen to take up these issues in a very particular way and this is around the question of the 'figuration of ethnicity' in cinema. Our point of entry is around the issue of black representation. The Collective was launched with three principal aims. Firstly, to attempt to look critically at how racist ideas and images of black people are structured and presented as self-evident truths in cinema. What we are interested in here is how these 'self-evident truths' become the conventional pattern through which the black presence in cinema is secured.

Secondly, to develop a 'forum' for disseminating available film techniques within the independent tradition and to assess their pertinence for black cinema. In this respect our interests did not only lie in devising how best to make 'political' films, but also in taking the politics of representation seriously. Such a strategy could take up a number of issues which include emphasising both the form and the content of films, using recent theoretical insights in the practice of film-making.

Thirdly, the strategy was to encourage means of extending the boundaries of black film culture. This would mean attempting to de-mystify in our film practice the process of film production; it would also involve collapsing the distinction between 'audience' and 'producer'. In this ethereal world film-maker equals active agent and audience usually equals passive consumers of a predetermined product. We have decided to reject such a view in our practice.

Underlying these aims are a number of assumptions about what we consider the present priorities of independent film-making should be. These assumptions are based on our recognition of certain significant achievements in the analysis of race and the



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## BLACK INDEPENDENT FILM-MAKING

A STATEMENT BY THE BLACK  
AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE  
JOHN AKOMFRAH

media. It is now widely accepted that the media play a crucial role in the production and reproduction of 'common-sense assumptions' and we know that race and racist ideologies figure prominently in these assumptions. The point now is to realise the implications of these insights in creating a genuinely collective black film culture.

Such a programme is also connected with our awareness of the need to go beyond certain present assumptions about the task of black film-making. We recognise that the history of blacks in films reads as a legacy of stereotypes and we take the view that such stereotypes, both in mainstream and independent cinema, should be critically evaluated. This can be connected to a number of things that we want to do. We not only want to examine how black culture is mis-represented in film, but also how its apparent transparency is given a 'realism' in film. It is an attempt to isolate and render intelligible the images and statements which converge to represent black culture in cinema. The search is not for 'the authentic image' but for an understanding of the diverse codes and strategies of representation.

It could be argued that all this is stale water under a decaying bridge and that we know all this stuff already and that black film-makers already accept their responsibility and are aware of these problems. There is a lot of truth in this. Others may say that as long as we are making films and gaining exposure of our work we are keeping black film culture alive.

To place our discussion in a relevant and meaningful context the Black Audio/Film Collective in conjunction with Four Corners cinema will be organising a number of screenings to run with the Colin Roach photography exhibition at Camerawork Gallery.

The series of films and discussion will run under the title of *Cinema and Black Representation* and will deal specifically with the complexity of black portrayal in films. The main aim here is to see how film can contain 'information' on race, nationality and 'ethnicity' with (Presence) or without (Absence) black people in films. With this in mind we hope to cover a number of films and themes ranging from prison movies like *Scum* to Hollywood social criticism films like *Imitation of Life*. What we will be attempting will not be to push all the films into one category of racist films but rather attempting to examine what specific responses these films make to the question of race and ethnicity.

In the end we realise that questions of black representation are not simply those of film criticism but inevitably of film-making. These issues need to be taken up on both

fronts. With this in mind we are also making preparations with the GLC Ethnic Minorities' Committee to organise a number of courses on some of the themes outlined in this article. Neither the dates for the screenings nor film courses have been finalised – both will be advertised when they are.

'I am indebted to 'The Core' – Eddie George, Lina Gopaul, Claire Joseph, Trevor Mathison for discussion which led to this transcription.



178. Lina Gopaul, John Akomfrah, *Visions and Revisions* film familiarisation course, 1984

179. *Different Desires*, Trevor Mathison, 1982–85

## WHICH WAY FORWARD?

LINA GOPAUL

This paper will be concerned with the possibilities of Black Independence – the language of possibilities is necessary, because what we mean when we invoke the term ‘Black Film sector’ is a film-making practice characterised by different points of *entrée* – different desires, different strategies and modes of intervention in film making.

But the language of possibilities is fixed by a context: this question of context is one of the issues we want to explore today.

Black Audio Film Collective believes that the grant-aided sector now exists in a critical conjuncture. It is a location which is governed and structured by a number of considerations: 1) Political 2) Cultural 3) Financial

These are the sets of considerations which constitute the present structural crises, of which the dominant one is financial.

Black Audio Film Collective, like other workshops, is still developing. Our present is partly the result of the 1981 uprisings. But our development cannot simply be understood in mechanical or reductionist terms. Black film-making existed before the riots, but it took different forms – here lies a paradox which confronts workshops.

In 1981 we witnessed the riots which in turn created a space for our intervention in the media – but curiously enough the further entrenchment of Thatcherist policies i.e. GLC abolition, rate capping, the Arts Council’s Glory of the Garden etc. presents



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a threat to the sector’s existence. With the demise of the GLC and the absence of a 1981 conjuncture we face financial uncertainties, traumas and even annihilation.

The reason for this should be made clear. Black workshop practice, like other forms of cultural production, necessarily exists in a relation of dependency to funding agencies. Black workshops face a future in which they could become recipients of a rhetoric of aid.

The implication of this shift means that the sector is pushed into a different context of operations. A new context, therefore, demands a coherent but broad strategic practice. For the task ahead no single strategy is adequate – we must deploy a multiplicity of strategies because the conjunction demands it.

- 1) It is imperative that we take on the priorities of institutional struggle.
- 2) That we take seriously the question of representation within institution.
- 3) That we debate and dialogue around institutions.
- 4) Collective mobilisation for institutional changes.

This necessarily means calling for reformulation of present cultural policies. We need policies which take account of race – but only as a means of concretising debate on media access and control. We recognise that on the subject of race and cinema the majority of funding practices amount to nothing other than rhetoric.



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180. Trevor Mathison, Claire Joseph, John Akomfrah,  
Edward George, Ridley Road, 1984

181. Avril Johnson, Moscow, 1988

This is clearly articulated in present funding criteria, because funding policies are primarily geared towards white film and video groups; a massive disparity has been created and sustained by present funding policies.

Black workshops do not need independence by proxy.

The question of institutional struggle is important at the level of film training – very little can be learnt from short courses because students can inevitably do little after them. We therefore need to work towards a position from which we can begin to demand that race and cinema become a permanent feature of film school training. In this context knowledge of technique is in itself not enough.

Politics and language is just as important and imperative in black film culture as any other element. Film familiarisation courses that are conducted by groups in the sector and those organised by the black body politic – these must be seen as part of a general strategy for the future development of the sector.

In relation to black and Third World cinema, institutions currently involved in distributing these films are not effectively circulating and publicising them.

Britain's black and migrant communities have been forged out of unequal relationships between the centre and the periphery. These relationships as we all know extend to cultural forms and the circulation of imagery. Thus black and Third World cinema is directly relevant to the political and cultural development of our communities.

Distribution institutions have lapsed in their priorities, to the point where there are more and more African film-makers for example becoming increasingly reluctant to send their films to British distribution agencies. An alternative structure or institution whose primary aim is to promote and disseminate black and Third World films is absolutely necessary. The politics of such an institution would have to be informed by black and Third World histories and how that relates to the specificity of Britain's black and migrant communities.

In Thatcherite Britain a language of alliance is becoming increasingly necessary. We would need to think through the possibilities of concrete collaborations between black and Third World film-makers. The issues which confront us are necessarily diverse and we need to approach them in the spirit of diversity.



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The ABW is a grouping of eight black film and video workshops situated throughout the country. Its general function is to represent and advance the interests of the Black Workshop sector in areas of production, distribution, training and exhibition, to provide a framework in which it is possible to affect questions of production and finance.

From the eight workshops, an important cluster of film and video familiarisation courses have been initiated. The Black Audio Film Collective ran a 12-week course covering the technological, theoretical and analytical aspects of film and cinema. Titled 'Visions and Revisions' (1984/5), the course delineated and connected a number of concerns around race and cinema, problems of how to deploy the technology for a black independent film culture, problems of training and problems of finance, problems of politicising the technology. Other courses followed, particularly by Retake Film and Video Collective, Ceddo Workshop and Sankofa. In their own distinctive ways, each group prioritised questions of politicising the relation of race to the technology of film and video, both in practice and theory.

The courses were advantageous in a number of ways. To begin with, they answered a critical absence. There was an absence of training at any cogent level for blacks: there was a lack of a historical framework for the presence of such training; the 1980s have

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN TRAINING

EDWARD GEORGE  
(ASSOCIATION OF  
BLACK WORKSHOPS)

182. Claire Joseph, Edward George, Reece Auguste,  
*Visions and Revisions* film familiarisation course, 1984

183. *Looking Black* film familiarisation course  
outline, 1985

Design: Edward George

been the first period in post-war Britain in which we have been able to get to grips with film and video technology for our own interests. This is largely because of a number of political and institutional interventions made by working and underclass blacks in the late 1970s which forced questions of race and cultural production onto the political agenda.

The training that existed before the rise of the eight black workshops failed to establish a sense of interconnectedness between race, cinema process(es) of signification and technology, its institutions and independent film making. The effect of this absence is that there would exist a number of qualified black technicians but no structures by which the technology could be consistently deployed for political and cultural self-interest.

For us, as people interested in film and video work and the possibilities of a yet to be realised film and video culture, training was important for a number of reasons. It would enable us to realise our own projects. We could challenge existing technical norms and gain entry into securing a certain technological independence. It would engender a concrete engagement with the production of meaning, especially around cinema's racial bodies. Such training would provide us with such skills that we should stand the same chances of employment as a white person similarly skilled. Moreover, it would firmly contextualise such skills in the interests of a black film and video culture.

An impossible demand perhaps, since the very sense in which production was thought of excluded a self-interested black independent presence. Blacks were often considered the least suitable for making films or videos on issues particular to themselves, possibilities of finance were negligible, and this lack of financial support, coupled with a failure by the largely white independent sector to fully address questions of an independence based around race, cinema and technology, reflected an agenda at odds with our own desires for a black film/video culture. The workshops thus emerged as a means of securing our own training for our own ends.

The film and video courses provided by the workshops intervened in an area where previously no voice(s) had existed which specifically addressed questions of training for black film and video makers. There had been the Black Media Worker Association (BMWA), whose function was to provide a broad intervention into the area of blacks employed in the media. Unfortunately its diversity tended to diffuse its effectivity, especially in relation to independent film and video making. The National Film and Television School of course provided courses which were generally available, but its almost non-existent intake of black people reflected a hidden agenda of exclusion of the black working class on the grounds of a lack of finance and under-qualification.

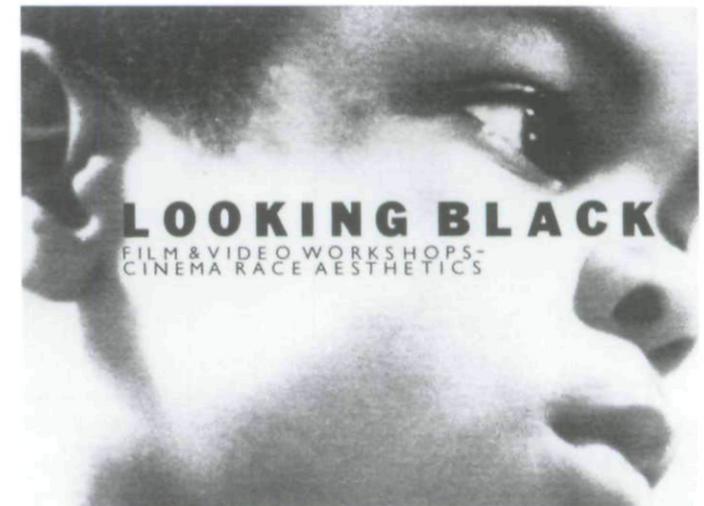
In the context of previous training initiatives for black people, the workshops' initiatives proved beneficial for a number of reasons. They have built a very particular audience, a critical constituency, the majority of which is increasingly committed to a black independent film and video culture. At their most successful, the workshops have identified an integrated teaching practice, a process which connects questions of technology to wider questions of production – questions of finance, distribution and exhibition. They have problematised the relation of the technology to an anti-racist cultural politics of film and video. Such courses provide a number of areas of possible intervention for training, again particularised by an ongoing commitment to a black independent film and video culture. It also provides important systems of support, internal structures and specific interest groups which can lead to different approaches to film and video.

Overall, the main advantages of the film and video familiarisation courses was that they provided an exposition of the importance of politicising the technological aspects of film and video making, so that it could no longer be an isolated technicist question simply of hands-on experience, but one of connecting that experience of technology to wider questions of race and gender (BAFC's 'Looking Black' f/v course, 1985), finance and distribution (Ceddo's 'What Future the Black Workshops?' 1985),

meaning and productivity (BAFC's 'Race Truces' screenings and seminars, 1985).

The courses did, however, have their shortcomings. They were brief and sporadic (lasting a week to a few months at the longest), and it proved difficult to provide students with the next step; the courses do not ensure unionisation, nor do they guarantee further training since there is little formal recognition of the courses by any of the more established training bodies (JobFit, NFTS, the numerous art school f/v courses). The courses had no real cultural /political status outside of their own context; people may be in a better position to secure training on the basis of their experience with the workshops, but not on the basis of the workshops' cultural/political specificity, or the basic ways in which they outlined the importance of training. The workshops are largely dependent on other courses (NFTS, JobFit etc.) to further concretise their initiatives, hence the importance of a dialogue with institutions which prioritise questions of training.

Since the rise of the black workshop sector, there have been many changes in the availability and meaning of training. Unfortunately, initiatives such as JobFit have failed to recognise the success of the workshops' approaches to training. For the future, the workshops will continue to run courses which will become more comprehensive and increasingly sophisticated, building on their own developments.



# INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTIONS OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

EDWARD GEORGE

184–85. Catalogue, *Reflections of the Black Experience*, 1986

186. Edward George, *Visions and Revisions* film familiarisation course, 1984

187. Catalogue, *From Two Worlds*, 1986

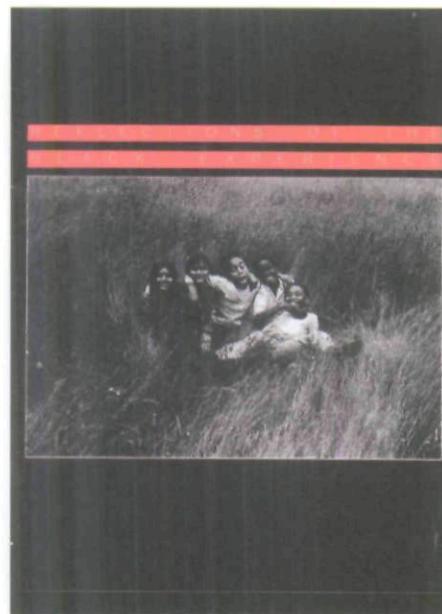
188. Catalogue, *The image employed: The use of narrative in Black art*, 1987

We are confronted with a body of photographic work. A body of reflections on the black experience in post-war Britain. A series of photographic meditations, diverse in their character yet consistent in their emphasis on the primacy and value of autonomous representation in matters pertinent to the lives of black people in Britain.

We are confronted with a corpus of concerns, the substance of a photographic inventory – the social; the political; the economic; that of gender and sexuality; the cultural. An expansive terrain, full of familiar signs and referents. What is there to convince us that these photographers can at least show something new of the familiar, or at best, convince us of anything more than the familiar?

We have excerpts from the work of 10 black photographers, their names might be new to you. They were selected on interview and portfolio by a small panel of black workers in the cultural field. Among the photographers are photo-journalists, students, cultural practitioners, and political activists.

They come from a diversity of cultural/political backgrounds, and use photography for a number of different ends. This might make us wonder about the idea of so many divergent perspectives forming one exhibition, especially one with such a tenuously homogenising title.



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## REFLECTIONS OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

PRESENTED BY: THE GLC RACE EQUALITY UNIT  
PROGRAMME DIRECTOR: PARMINDER VIR  
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS: JOHNEY OHENEEDIE GEORGE  
PICTURE EDITOR/EXHIBITION CO-ORDINATOR: MONIKA BAKER

The photographers are:

MARC BOOTH ■  
VANLEY BURKE ■  
SUNIL GUPTA ■  
MUMTAZ KARIMJEE ■  
DAVID LEWIS ■  
ZAK OVE ■  
INGRID POLLARD ■  
SUZANNE RODEN ■  
MADAH SHARAK ■

SELECTIONS  
OF WORK BY  
ARMET FRANCIS

The photographic exhibition is one of the events in the Black Experience Arts Programme which is a London wide programme reflecting historical and contemporary black experience through a variety of art forms.

© All rights reserved for the photographic images in this programme.

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The title of this exhibition is 'Reflections of the Black Experience'. It is a body of work made from study, impression and contemplation. It draws from an inventory of contemporary and historical references, for a political/racial memory to come and one which is with us. What coheres divergences is the question of race. The body of work here constitutes a racial body in that the photographers' collective worldview is spoken in the interests of a number of black presences. The photographs are here to work in the interests of these presences before any considerations. This collectivity is African, Asian, and Caribbean in its descent and its ascension, and while such collectivity is not new, it is not common enough. The racial body of these photographs is gendered, its sexuality is formed along the boundaries of the racial /political and these are the means by which it speaks. The gender and the colour of this racial body signifies at the level of their geopolitical and cultural effects rather than as questions of chromosome and pigmentation or biology and physiognomy.

We thus have a number of presences, a body constituted from differences, held in the moment of photography. We are in the presence of Asian women and men, and Afro/Caribbean women and men. They take photographs and the unity of their exclusivity makes them particular. It affirms an opposition, a positioned response to existing visual histories of the black experience which may not essentially prioritise the

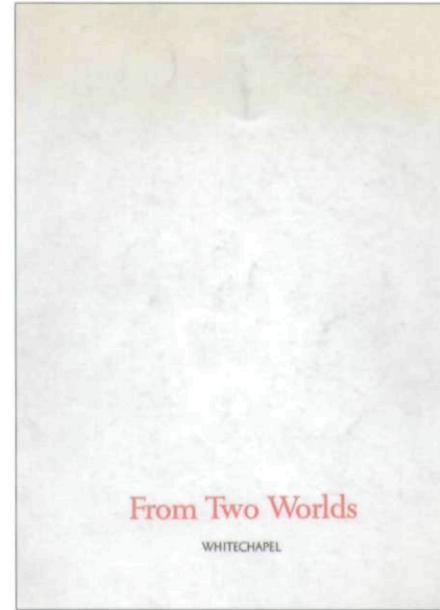


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interests of black people. Should this body of work engender new associations for us in the face of these histories which jostle for our attention? Will it be a useful addition to a growing language of cultural struggle? These are questions for reflection.

'Reflections' marks a 'moment' in a time of economic and political implosion. A moment when a number of cultural initiatives have been taken by municipal government as responses to the demands for 'new values'. The old order has been thrown into a state of imminent collapse by the excesses of 'minority' interests. 'Reflections' is a component part of municipal government's challenge to the claims of these demands. On this occasion, the spaces that hold photographic discourses together are being fought for. They are the spaces of the body, the space of event, and the space held for questions of geography. What is at stake here is the ownership of the terrain of social relations upon which the racial body is used to mark out, and conversely, upon whose body is marked out the terms and limits of existence for a class.

The presence of this body of work is reflected and mediated by the memories and traces, the practices and situations of other photographies. In these presences lie multiple histories of the racial body; images and bodies lying embalmed in uneven



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From Two Worlds

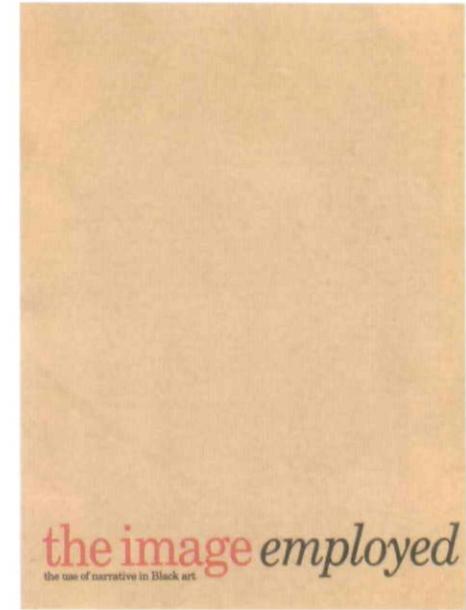
WHITECHAPEL

and contradictory relation.

In the wake of the body lies photography's contingency, the force of history against discourse. And central to photography's discourses of the body, of event and geography, is a lack, for the racial body, of self-movement, a body without an internal machinery, frame upon frame of meaning grinding the body to halt.

We are confronted by a photographic socius. We may be 'born again' in these photographs. We may be witnessing our deaths in objects. We are confronted by the possibility that this exposition may mark the ascendancy of a new racial body, a new geography of racial discourse, a new positioning of the racial body in the field of social relations.

These possibilities need not be regulated or normalised by talk of 'positive images'. The images here are neither positive or negative, and that is not where their effectivity lies. The question for the success of these photographs lies in the extent to which they can establish new cartographies of presence while rethinking the old. It is a question of timely meditation and calculated mediation; of challenging the force with which governmental, judicial, corporate interest, and market forces produce meaning from and around the racial body for their own ends.



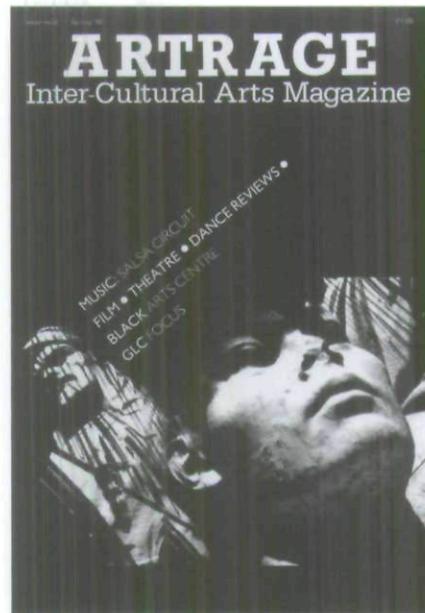
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the image employed

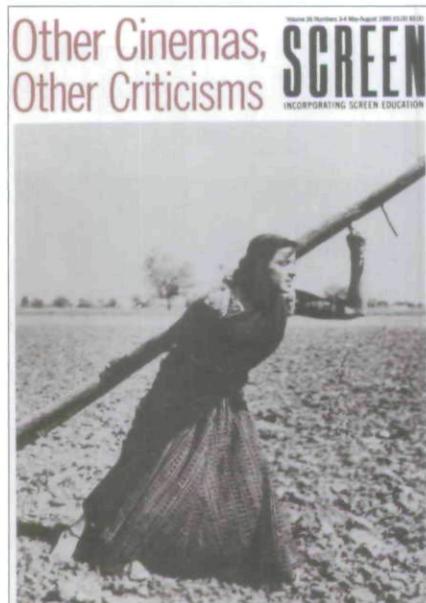
the use of narrative in Black art

## BLACK CINEMA, POETICS AND NEW WORLD AESTHETICS

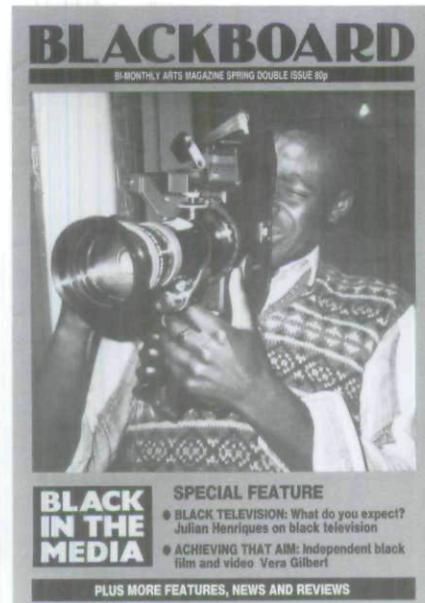
REECE AUGUSTE



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Histories of black independent film practice have hemmed film-makers into a set of social relations which demands that the inventories of cinema itself should be assessed anew. An analytical reading of this cultural field reveals two distinct but yet interrelated historical antecedents which inform our filmic practices: the early period of British black independent film production from Lionel Ngkane's allegorical *Jemima and Johnnie* (1954) to that of the 1970s with the films of Henry Martin, Horace Ove, Imruh Bakari (Caesar) and Menelik Shabazz and the political and aesthetic interventions of Third Cinema as a counter-movement in film, which is critical of its position as it is of European cinema.

Our point of departure is that each generation rewrites its own history. Black independent film practice is at a critical juncture where it must necessarily make a radical departure from other film practices. Our presence in independent cinema, as it is currently structured and mediated by institutional and the political is, I believe, engaged in a struggle for its epistemological terrain through modes of visual articulation and narrative concerns which do not desire to emulate or mimic other cinemas. It is a cinema critical of its own discourse as it is of other cinemas.

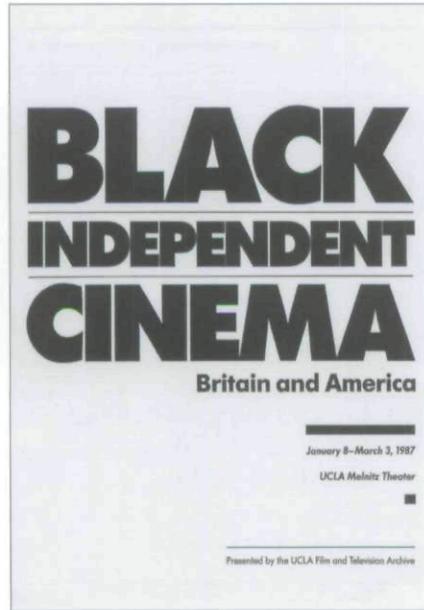
There are two distinct traditions from which black independent film practitioners can extrapolate materials towards the development of their own film aesthetic: one is the literary traditions of the diaspora, rich and diverse in myth, parables, and orature and its diverse practices in the diaspora; the second is Teshome Gabriel's theoretical work on Third Cinema: *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*.

It is these interrelated fields that are capable of producing the desired inflections, new forms and new narrative structures in cinema. Black British independent film-makers are the product of the New World, also of Africa and India, and whether born in the Third World or in the spectacle of declining British inner cities, they have a generic connection with the perils, pleasures, passions and contradictions, the cultural landscapes of the New World.

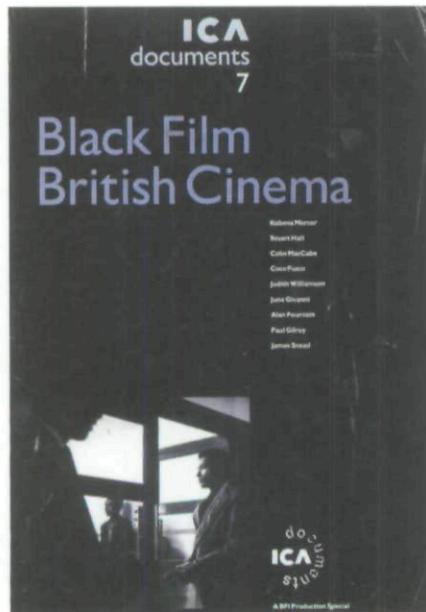
I want to turn my attention to Derek Walcott, who, in my view, is the Caribbean's greatest poet. Assuming that Derek Walcott's maxim, 'Each generation re-writes its own history', is correct – as I believe it is – it therefore becomes possible to locate the manner in which black independents articulate a series of incisions and inscriptions into the history of British independent film culture. A combination of the system of racial representations and the inventories of cinema have structured our engagements with the histories and practices of cinema, with narrative forms and structures and with



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189. *Artrage Inter-Cultural Arts Magazine*, Issue no. 8, Spring, 1985
190. *Screen: Other Cinemas, Other Criticisms*, Volume 26 Numbers 3-4, May-August, 1985
191. *Blackboard*, double issue, Spring 1986
192. *Undercut: the magazine from the London Filmmakers Coop*, Number 17: Cultural Identities, Spring 1988
193. *Black Independent Cinema*, University of California, 1987
194. *Black Film British Cinema*: ICA documents 7, 1988

political/economic questions upon which independence is based.

I shall make reference to Brazilian cinema – Cinema Novo – a cinema of extreme solitude, reflection and revelation. Historical, geographical and economic differences aside, I am compelled to reiterate Glauba Rocha's insights on oppositional film practice:

When film-makers organise themselves to start from zero, to create a cinema with new types of plot lines, of performance of rhythm, and with a different poetry, they throw themselves into the dangerous revolutionary adventure, of learning while you produce, of placing side by side theory and practice, of reformulating every theory through every practice, of conducting themselves according to the apt dictum coined by Nelson Pereira Dos Santos from some Portuguese poet: 'I don't know where I'm going, but I know I'm not going over there.'

I'm not arguing for an uncritical reproduction of the filmic practices of Third Cinema. I make reference to Glauber Rocha so as to demonstrate an affinity with the desire to rupture and embark on new beginnings. Black film-makers are constituted by diverse histories of exclusion and emigration; by cultural experiences emanating from the historical conditions of the New World, Asia and Africa. The cultural terrain upon which we work is invested and structured by pluralism, which indicates the immense problems involved in attempting to affirm a unitary definition of cultural identity and social experience(s) through the apparatus of cinema. Cultural diversity disavows the singular and monolithic in cultural production. It is precisely this diversity of experiences that must inform aesthetic production and the problematisation of representation.

Derek Walcott has painted in words a visual representation of the Caribbean archipelago, finding the source of his vision in its human tragedies, its terrors and triumphs. It is revealing that Walcott once remarked that 'The truly tough aesthetics of the New World neither explains nor forgives history'. Given that in this forum we're talking around the binary of politics and aesthetics in cultural production, it is appropriate that I enunciate the invaluable contribution that New World literary discourses and aesthetics can make in the development of our visions of black cinema in Britain. It is here that memory must assume the position of privileged informer. The extrapolation of memory from literary forms and contexts crystallises the intersection between literary concerns and cinema. New World poets such as Pablo Neruda of Chile and the Martiniquan, Aimé Césaire, for example, have made memory the substance of their work. The desire to grapple with the tropes of memory, with the intersection of myth and history must not be understood as exclusive to literary productions although these constitute a body of archival matter which can inform our film practice.

Although history continues to weigh heavily on the present, there exists a paradox in that it is not the unbearable forays of past history which continue to traumatise New World consciousness, but the ambivalence and tragedies of the modern; a contemporary vision which struggles with tragedy. Here the myth of the noble savage collapses under its metaphysical contradictions. Walcott reminds us of this when he says '... that myth never emanated from the savage, but has always been the nostalgia of the old world – its longing for innocence'. Our vision is not naïve, unlike the great monumental poetry of the Old World; we do not pretend such innocence. Memory as it is conceptualised by New World poets is salted with the bitter memory of immigration and fragmentation. It is this acidic taste of memory that has to be brought to the service of the struggle of black independent film practitioners.

These are historical and contemporary ideas that should be addressed by cinema. New departures in film culture also necessitate a struggle for radical forms, reference points, for a filmic vitality in narrativity and audio/visual style. Film practitioners cannot continue to rearticulate the discourses which structure positive/negative representations of race. Film-makers who want to develop a cinema of relevance must jettison the discursive concerns of multiculturalism and the positive/negative image to the cultural wasteland. Our presence in the 1980s demands an interrogation of the rhetoric of race in relation to cinema. It also necessitates a re-politicisation of the technological apparatus of cinema. Politicisation can occur in the production process. A testing of possibilities and limitations.

Thus the successes of the black independent sector rest on an astute reading of the political economy of independence, institutional practices and a radical reconvergence of cultural identities and filmic representation/production. If Walcott's notion of an aesthetics which 'neither explains nor forgives history' is to supersede the dominant discourses of the European avant-garde and other cinema traditions, then film-makers have to interrogate and evaluate the genealogy of those traditions. Again it is a question of testing limitations. Engagement with cinema thus assumes a set of multiple practices, which is why I believe that the title of the forum is both inadequate and deceptive. The struggle for new life and vibrancy in cinema must occur on multiple fronts.

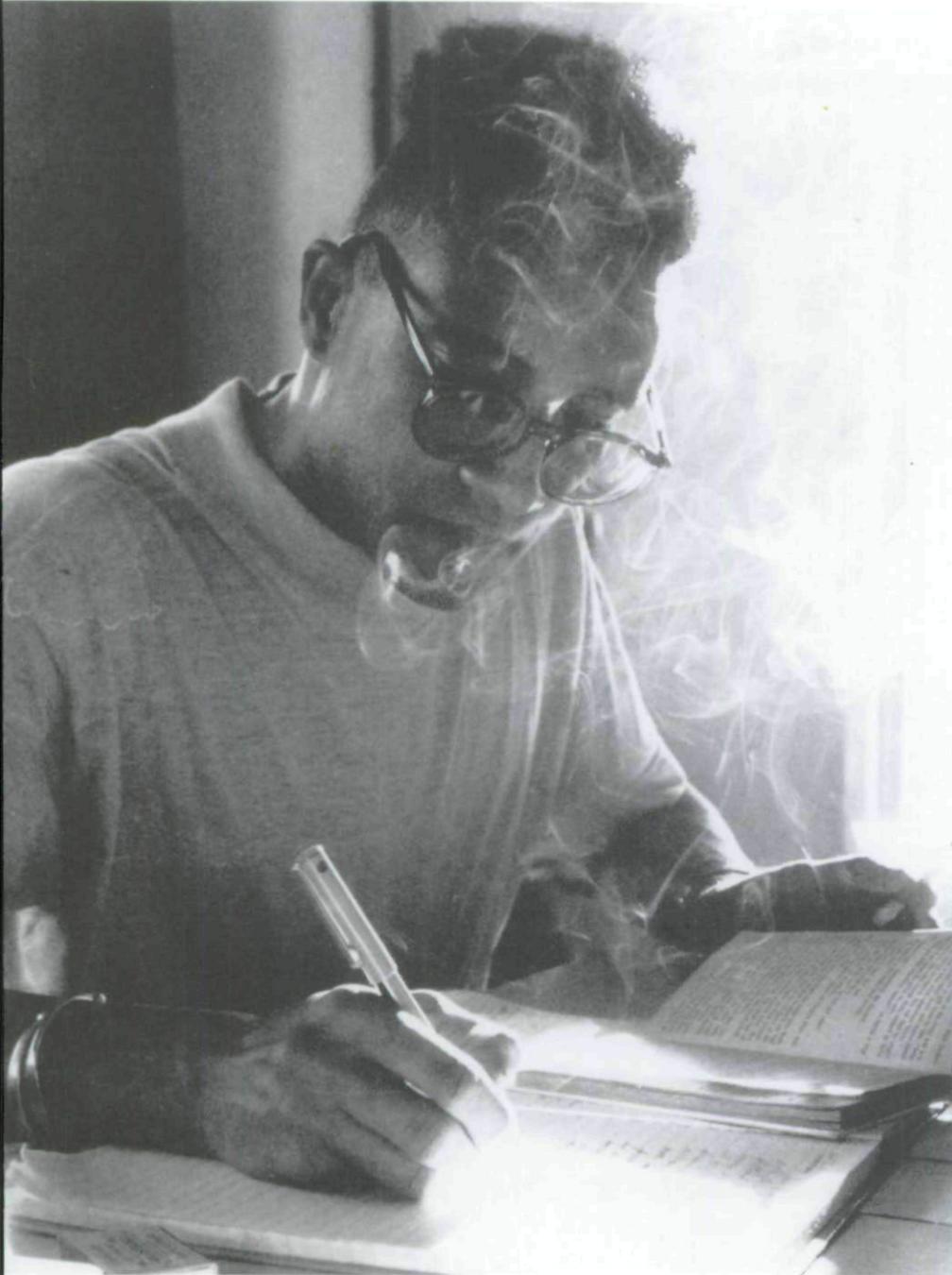
#### **Diasporic Discourse and Inventories of Tradition**

The Ethiopian film-maker Haile Gerima has signified the importance of literary subjects in the formation of oppositional cinema: 'Because of the rich history of black literature and our renewed oral tradition, the independent cinematographer must, out of necessity, incorporate and fully use this astounding body of resource material.' Gerima's insight put into sharp focus the organic connection between New World poetics and the possibility of forging new aesthetic presences in black cinema. The poets of the New World have had to address memories of terror, its historical antecedents and the manner in which the present is mediated by it. These themes of terror and exploitation are indicative of the breadth and vision of New World imagination, as in for example, the poetics of the Guyanese poet Martin Carter, in his beautiful poem 'The Terror and The Time', which is the title of a film from the same country by the Victor Jara collective about the formation of the Guyanese working class.

#### **Notes Towards an Aesthetic of Terror**

It is possible, I believe, to develop an aesthetic of terror in cinema akin to Walcott's 'tough new aesthetic' which is ultimately transgressive, capable of producing mutations and incisions, which can ensure that the Western gaze can never regain its privileged position as the ultimate arbiter of symbolic meaning and representation. A black independent cinema which attempts to register an aesthetic of terror is concerned with possibilities, critical of its genealogy and trajectory. When we allow memory to assume the seat of privileged informer, of having a transgressive function, then the process of re-naming begins. As Walcott says 'We are blest with a virginal, unpainted world, with Adam's task of giving things their names'. The act of naming things anew is a fundamental prerequisite of a cinema with new voices and visions.

Finally, I shall address the issue of audience accessibility and questions of language. My reference point is Black Audio/Film Collective's slide/tape production *Expeditions: Signs of Empire and Images of Nationality*. The Collective has often been asked the question, 'Who is your audience?' The question is always premised by the understanding that



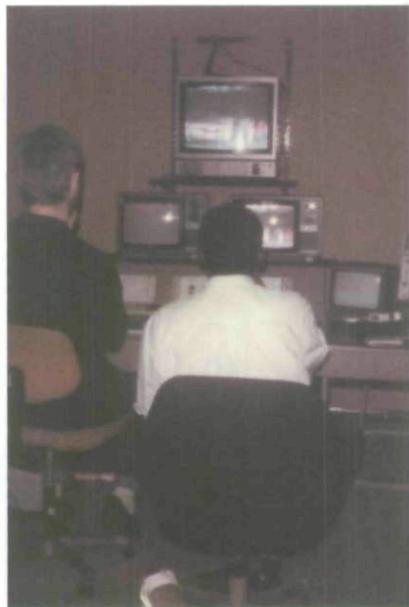
the language in which we have chosen to articulate colonial exigencies is thought of as rather abstract, difficult and ultimately inaccessible. I must deploy a Shakespearean subject so as to affirm the importance of the use of this language. The subject? Caliban. A subject whose historical existence is characterised by a psychic split: the language of Caliban's unconscious is as much to do with exclusion and accommodation as with fear. The paradox is that Caliban's presence reveals to us the psychic turmoil of his master Prospero. Through Caliban's action, Prospero's soul is revealed. Listen to Walcott on this dilemma. 'Your view of Caliban is of the enraged pupil. You cannot separate the rage of Caliban from the beauty of his speech, when the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor, the language of the torturer has been mastered by the victim.' Now the terrain upon which we work is such that the critical deployment of that language is towards the production of new meanings. This is viewed as collaboration with dominant language but for us it is victory.



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## HANDSWORTH SONGS: SOME BACKGROUND NOTES

REECE AUGUISTE



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With the launch of Black Audio Film Collective's debut film *Handsworth Songs* into the public domain, there has been much debate about the film's form, its multi-layered narrative structure, its audience and the deployment of archival footage. Most revealing about this debate has been that strand of thought which addressed the complexities of the role of black film artists in contemporary Britain. The underlying assumption advanced is that there is a particular documentary form or set of practices which Black Audio Film Collective should have pursued in the making of *Handsworth Songs*. The structure and form that our critics have alluded to is of course that of documentary realism. Unfortunately, these critics who have been most vociferous on this issue have in my opinion failed to address the numerous textual problems associated with this genre. One has to beg the question, 'Whatever happened to the debates that took place in the pages of *Screen*, *Framework* and other film journals concerning the problem of documentary realism?'

The reception of *Handsworth Songs* as a result has bordered on both critical acclaim and hostility, the latter has in our opinion been more dismissive than constructive. In the interview that follows the attempt has been to address and extend the parameters of the debate around our work. We also acknowledge that any introductory text to such an interview is equally problematic because of the dangers of reproducing what has already been said in the interview. So, in writing this introductory text, the attempt has been to avoid the temptation of writing in a manner that is overly didactic. We have decided to construct a text that at least struggles to overcome some of these problems.

### Poetics and Time

The work which later became known as *Handsworth Songs* already had an imaginary existence prior to its composition if one takes into account the abundance and creative use of archive film. Our first engagement with archives began back in 1982, and *Handsworth Songs* is partly a continuation of that engagement. *Handsworth Songs* was preceded by a two-part tape-slide project called *Expeditions: Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality*. *Expeditions* was a visual textual exploration of nation, the mythology and rhetoric of race, the uncertainties of empire, of paranoia and the psychic disintegration of colonial imaginations. It was ostensibly a visual presentation of the decentred 'I'. For Black Audio Film Collective, the archive constitutes a privileged terrain of knowledge: in archival texts we were confronted with fragmented residues of histories of migration, memories of the joy and pains of settlement, of the grim possibility of having to consolidate the

experiences of arrival and often how best to make sense of rejection in the face of hostility and social indifference. Every new piece of film that we retrieved from the archives presented us with new possibilities of deconstruction and simultaneously the reconstruction of both past and present.

One of the problems that we confronted in the construction of *Handsworth Songs* was how best to dramatise the past which is, for a few minutes, encapsulated and imprisoned by time. To bring alive those nervous reflexes, to capture and reconstitute the sensibilities of those who were forever 30 years voiceless or those who were given a voice when the BBC or other television companies said 'You may now speak, but don't forget our narrator holds in his left hand a sword and in the right hand the winning card.' In other words, 'we shall articulate your emotions, we shall define your sense of belonging or displacement'. Our task was to find a structure and a form which would allow us the space to deconstruct the hegemonic voices of British television newsreels. That was absolutely crucial if we were to succeed in articulating those spatial and temporal states of belonging and displacement differently. In order to bring emotions, uncertainties and anxieties alive we had to poeticise that which was captured through the lenses of the BBC and other newsreel units – by poeticising every image we were able to succeed in recasting the binary oppositions between myth and history, imagination and experiential states of occasional violence.

We are reminded by Elias Canetti that 'In England words waste away'. Handsworth explodes, sociologists produce exhausted theories, law and order barons scream for more demonic regulation of the surplus class. While theorists theorise, the volcano remains active, smoke and ashes refuse to disappear. The sulphuric smell defines the mood, the nation is astounded, but Handsworth remains voiceless, strangled into silence by the media barons. Explosions occasionally remind us that all is not well. 'One invention still lacking – how to reverse explosions' – Canetti. To make sense of the debris in Handsworth, Black Audio Film Collective had to reconstitute the fragments, and in so doing, words, sound and image came alive in an audio/visual style. Like a drama of long lost recognition, a politics of necessity brought to the public domain the contradictions of innocence and expectations. The sad irony of Lord Kitchener's words 'London is the place for me'. Kitchener standing on the deck, nervous, shaking, but desperately trying to keep the calypso rhythm together; Prospero wants to hear so Caliban must continue to sing it. The context of production, together with the film's own structure, ensures that the articulation of time and the black presence is recuperated and seen anew, that Britain's post-war anxieties around race are laid bare for all to see.

### Space and Politics

'Keeping people alive with words, isn't that almost the same as creating them with words?' – Canetti. Some have been quick to proclaim 'documentary film is dead'. Well, is it? While the cynics gather round to bury its lifeless bones, a gentle diasporic storm refused to acknowledge its death. Black Audio Film Collective says it is still possible to rescue it. The documentary form/narrative is not dead; the PRONOUNCEMENT of its death is an indication that a crisis of the cinematic imagination has taken root in British film culture. To let it die amounts to a disservice to the film work of John Grierson, Robert Flaherty and Humphrey Jennings.

*Handsworth Songs* was made in a Griersonian spirit with our own diasporic inflection adding substance to it. We began by wanting to resurrect the past, to reconstitute form, narrative space, of allowing memory to tell history, her/story differently. Our task was a flight from talking heads and didactic forms in cinema. Black Audio Film Collective's intention was always to stretch the imagination so that the poetics could be finely interlocked with a black political aesthetics. Poetry in combination with a set of multi-layered images forges a lyrical space into which British post-war sensibilities around race could be conceived anew, for 'In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between fingers acquiring a material weight only in its recollection' (Andrei Tarkovsky).

In the final analysis Black Audio Film Collective will continue to excavate the past while clutching in our hands segments of the present, because the important point is that the vibrancy of black independent film culture remains alive even in the debris of Prospero's malady.

196. John Akomfrah, Soho Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, UK, 1986

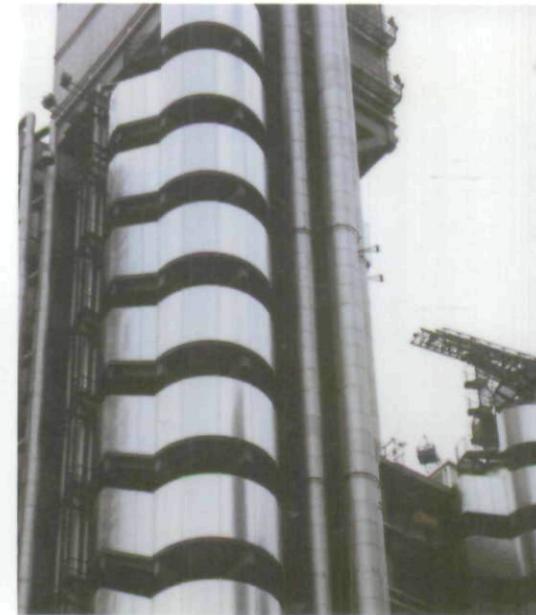
197. John Matheson, cameraman, John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986

## TWILIGHT: AUKER'S WORLD

REECE AUGUISTE



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*Twilight* is a 16mm film documentary essay on the idea of a city in ascension and decline. The film proceeds from the premise that it could be any modern metropolis. *Twilight*, however, is predominantly concerned with London, the metropolis, its past and its present, focusing on the inner cities. London will be explored from historical, contemporary, imaginary perspectives with a voice-over narration. Placed at the film's centre around which all three perspectives coalesce is the fictional character Auker whose presence can either be onscreen or through a voice-over (imaginary).

### Fragments of Auker's biography

Auker is a creature of the city, a product of its triumph and misfortunes. Born and raised on the south side of the city, Auker splits her time between work and travel. Auker's entry into the narrative is through voice-over narration. We are told of Auker's recent trips to South India, of her encounters with an old blind Dravidian military general who told her stories of ruined cities, cities with fantastic names and histories and those that are living the last pages of their demise. He believes that the character and fate of cities can be read in the positioning of stars/planets in the solar system. But one city remains a mystery to him.

Isedora in the land of Macedonia. Auker vows to visit Macedonia (England) and on her return will tell him of Isedora (London), Macedonia's central city. Since he is blind, she will tell him of the stars and of their planetary positions, from which he will infer the fate of this fantastic city. Auker will then know the formula by which she can read the future of Macedonia's neighbours.

### Isedora (London): The metropolis

The film's narrative will address the city in terms of its districts and experiences of Thatcherism in the 80s. Through a combination of interviews, archives, voice-overs and shots of contemporary London, a portrait of the city will emerge. The various districts will be called by names other than their real names.

Isedora's financial centre will be referred to as Valdrada, i.e. the vicinity of the stock exchange. The centre of commerce, trade and the money market, there you will find the largest concentration of locusts and vultures. Valdrada's god is money and when its inhabitants are betrayed by their gods they are visited by calamities. The locusts and vultures will be examined in the context of the impact and reverberations of the big bang and Thatcherism itself on the city, through last October's Black Monday.



Hogarth's painting *A Rake's Progress* will be used to make both historical and allegorical commentary on contemporary London. In addition to this, the material that will be useful here will be archives of the 1930s stock market crash, government speeches, contemporary TV news reports and interviews.

London's inner cities will be referred to as the districts of Kademah. In Kademah, the occasional traveller will see the largest concentration of Isedora's dispossessed, its inhabitants walking its barren streets aimlessly, large groups of the unemployed, alcoholics and the homeless sleeping in stations and under bridges. In the midst of all this waste, the senate (Thatcher's government) has dispatched its task force team to Kademah (inner cities) to deal with its dispossessed.

Through the use of voice-overs we learn that on arrival in Macedonia (England) Auker finds her way to Isedora (London), the city built on thinning clay and chalk, a city of half-completed buildings, narrow canals and underground tunnels plagued with rats and fading monuments. A city whose inhabitants have been repeatedly struck by plagues and most recently an army of locusts and vultures (i.e. yuppies, financiers, property developers and cocaine users).

Auker discovers that the Macedonian senate (Thatcher's govt) has despatched a series of task force teams to the districts of Kademah (inner cities: Tower Hamlets, Peckham, Brent, Hackney, Brixton etc). In Isedora, Auker monitors the activities of the senate's task force team and begins to make contact with a cross-section of Isedora's inhabitants.

*Twilight* will present the views of this cross-section of people through a series of interviews in which they speak of different aspects of contemporary London in the era of Thatcherism—of their personal experiences and opinions of Thatcherism such as poll tax and its effect, homelessness, yuppies, drug abuse and how they view their metropolis in the year 2000.

The interviewees are a professor. An alcoholic. A writer. A busker. Community architects. The aged. A black senator (M.P.) from the Macedonian opposition party (Labour). The unemployed. Factory workers. Health care workers. Nurses. Interviews are to be filmed both on location and in studio.

The archives will include the following: Foreign diplomatic (i.e. commonwealth) visits to the city. Scenes of early immigrant life in London of the 1920s. Industries.



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Jesse Jackson's visit to the metropolis (already shot BAFC archives). Tebbit and Kinnock on the inner cities. Charles visits and pronounces on the inner cities. Burning buildings. An aerial shot of a burnt out desecrated city (Kiev).

In addition to archives, *Twilight* will make use of Hogarth's paintings and engravings to evoke a particular view of the past. Hogarth's paintings will be used in the development of the narrative in the sense that his work addresses the themes of the savage and civilised in English society i.e. the civility of the aristocracy juxtaposed against the squalor and depravity of the lower orders. Again, Hogarth's blacks, often depicted as either domestic servants or generally as part of the lower orders are in fact pointers to the hypocrisy and degeneracy of English society.

The paintings are: *Gin Lane*, *Marriage a la mode*, *A Harlot's Progress* and *The Four Stages of Cruelty*. Hogarth's paintings will heighten the film's allegorical context/style.

Details of London's gothic buildings will further heighten the themes of horror and dominance as a characteristic feature of the metropolis.

198. Photographic test, The City of London, *Twilight City*, 1989

199. Photographic test, Lloyds of London, *Twilight City*, 1989

200. Photographic test, Spillers Millennium Mill, Royal Victoria Docks, *Twilight City*, 1989

201. Photographic test, Nat West Tower, *Twilight City*, 1989

202. Photographic test, Co-operative Wholesale Society Mill, Royal Victoria Docks, *Twilight City*, 1989

203. Hilda Sealy as Olivia Levelle, *Twilight City*, 1989



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## IDENTITY

AVRIL JOHNSON

I wanted to raise two points about identity as a way of dealing with an increasing dilemma about the relationship between the public and the private.

I knew this had some relationship with a general question of identity raised by this conference. But I also realised that in putting the two things together, a private dilemma about the relation between the public and the private and an ongoing debate about identity, cultural or otherwise, immediately opened up another dilemma that is to do with choice and urgency on a political level. Privately it is to do with positioning; with how one positions oneself vis-à-vis a grand monolith of race and nationality; with how one positions one's speech vis-à-vis the binaries of inside and outside, with whether one continues to co-opt with the futile gesture of them and us.

The dilemma is also one of delegation – which self will I delegate to speak on my behalf here today for myself and Lina for a conference of mainly academics, which I clearly am not, if the theme is one of identity. The dilemma is ultimately one of speech. What speech I feel comfortable with, what speech will reveal something to you. It is a general dilemma about how one reconciles subjectivity with different speech communities while working as a Producer, Production Manager, Script Consultant, Collective member.

These are professional subjectivities as it were. 'Professional' speeches and professional positions of speech. I could speak to you as:

- a) A Black Woman
- b) Ethnicity i.e. born in the Caribbean etc.
- c) A member of Black Audio

But I must confess to you these dilemmas are clearly to do with previous positions. Previous places that race has occupied in my life and I dare say yours.

I have worked for five years in a Collective which has been primarily concerned with experience and representation. With enabling and empowering – however problematic those tasks might be.

The concern with representation was clearly a concern with social categories. With the vigorous demands of Race that subjectivities connect with.

The categorical imperative of Race was that when identities speak they primarily confess a racial experience; that difference comes in different colours – one which will never mention its name, the other which would endlessly confess its experience. One which would give its authority by silence, the other which would always rise to effortlessly position itself by telling it like it is.

This leads me to the two points I wanted to raise in the beginning. Points to do with difference and identity; to do with how difference is articulated, how different categories are formulated and reformulated.

In *Twilight City* we travel with Olivia through London, taking a tortuous route of denial of identity and the destruction of Utopia. This has obvious implication for debates around identity.

A friend asks why we still maintained a black in the Collective's name – behind this question is a desire for wish fulfilment, i.e. the business of race is over. One would like for this to be true. But when the Arts Council decided to get rid of different ethnic categories and instead implement the pluralism of cultural diversity/difference one questions what practical value this will have. One doesn't want to say that the business of race is never finished because that would leave race in a historical vacuum from which it cannot be rescued.

Inside the black community *Network East* had a phone-in programme about whether Asians consider themselves black. The idea behind the question is that some people have gone beyond calling themselves black while others still desire that category.

Both positions display the same desire for wish fulfilment. To raise these two points isn't to fix race permanently as unfinished business, but to point to the discrepancy between circulation of categories and subjectivity. If there have been changes they have been arrived at through debate and will not be glimpsed by unilateral declaration of independence.

## BLACK INDEPENDENTS AND THIRD CINEMA: THE BRITISH CONTEXT

REECE AUGUISTE/  
BLACK AUDIO FILM  
COLLECTIVE

*We are coming from too much,  
we are moving towards too little.*

Elias Canetti

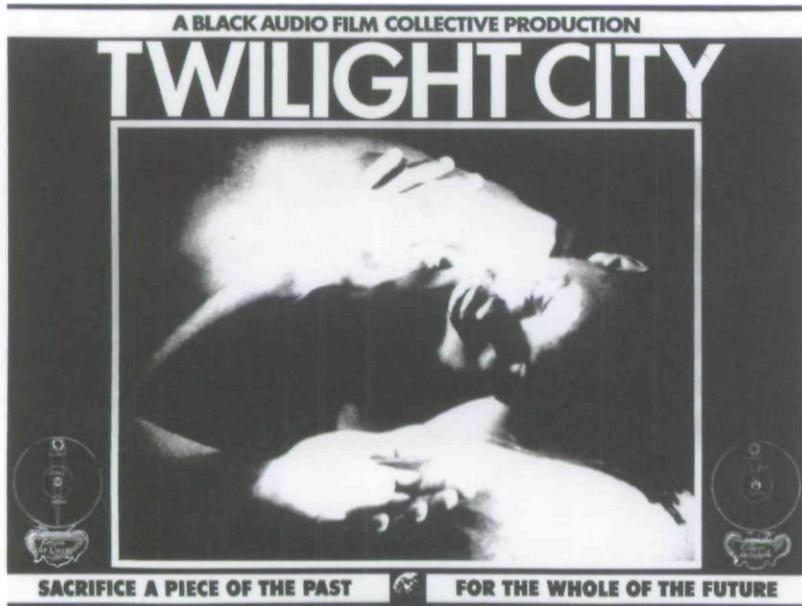
I will proceed by posing a set of questions that I believe have emanated from the historical context of black independent film production in Britain. They are questions that should concern all audio-visual practitioners who are serious about the direction of black independents.

In the general context of Third Cinema practices it is of vital importance that there is some clarification of the terrain from which we speak, that film-makers are aware of the social conditions in which they are expected to produce a politics and cinema aesthetics of relevance. The threat posed to the possibility of sustaining black independence implies that an examination of our situation is necessary. The questions which Black Audio Film Collective wish to ask are:

1. What is the precise state of black independence vis-à-vis the British cultural industries?
2. Do the history and contemporary engagements of black film-makers constitute Third Cinema practice in Britain?

These are complex questions and any resolution has to emanate from concrete analysis of the political economy of cinema in Britain. For independents the question of production has always been an issue of priority. However, the desire to produce film as commodity has a location in the market and is determined by conjunctural factors – economic, political and cultural. The sector's further development is therefore literally hemmed in by these social relations. It is important, then, that film practitioners analyse their location in relation to wider developments in the industry.

Our point of departure is propelled by the idea that each generation necessarily engages in a process of rewriting/reconstituting the past. Film-makers have to paint their own landscapes, they must breathe new life into each moment in cinema. That can only be achieved when practitioners have mapped out the field of visual representations and the film techniques they may wish to deploy. Historicity aside, the presence of British black independents is essentially a post-war phenomenon, of which the black workshops are the most recent development. Historically, the workshops have always been structured and determined by three interconnecting factors: 1) political, 2) financial, and 3) cultural. Those three interconnecting categories have always determined, and will continue to do so, what is possible or not possible in an already severely racialised terrain. The space that we occupy as film-makers is increasingly becoming crisis-ridden, and thus the political economy of our independence is threatened. Undoubtedly Thatcherism, which is of course the most distinctive form



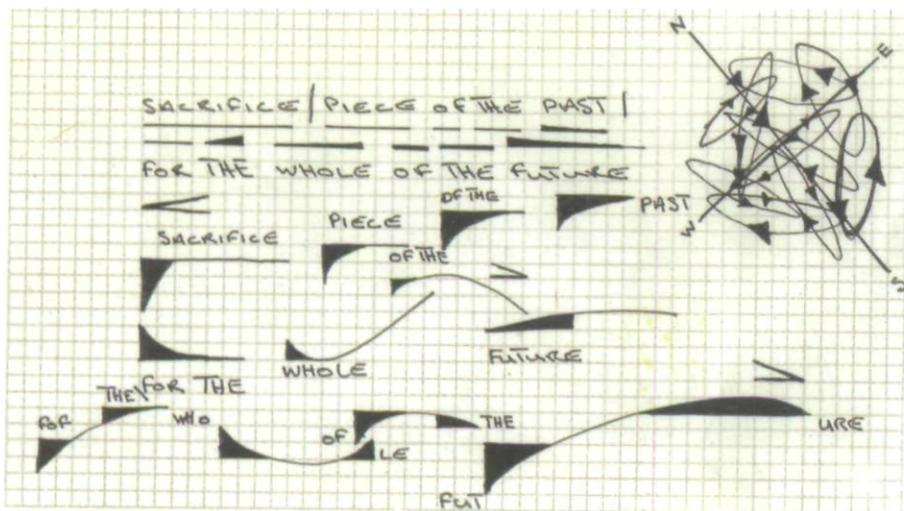
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of Conservative politics of the post-war years, has had multiple effects on the British cultural industries. Again, and paradoxically, the crisis is not Thatcherism itself, but the broad Left and its inability to produce an alternative vision of Britain in the 80s. A general paralysis seems to govern the Left's political imagination in the 80s, and that is particularly pronounced in the area of cultural production.

Having said that, we must also acknowledge that the crisis of the British film industry predates the advent of Thatcherism. It appears that Thatcherite politics is merely hammering home the last few nails into the coffin. Those vital considerations aside, we still do not have a film policy on a national level that is capable of creating a vibrant and viable film and media industry; of promoting a film culture which has at its centre new and challenging visual productions, together with the necessary finances to ensure its continuation. A reformulated and viable film policy with central and local government providing capital investment would ensure full employment for film and video artists whose immense talent for the art of cinema often dies a horrendous death. Any national film policy, however, cannot afford to erase from its agenda the issues of race and representation; thus black independents have, with relentless persistence, to deliberate and ensure the inscription of race on any film policy agenda in Britain. In this cataclysmic field of multiple contradictions, of political and cultural uncertainties, which is partly determined by economic monetarism, where precisely are black independents located and how can we best arrest the tide?

From our critical evaluation and assessment of this conjunctural crisis, vis-à-vis cinema, Black Audio Film Collective believes that independent producers in this sector occupy a social space that is structured and governed by determinance of a state of emergency. If I can for a moment quote Homi Bhabha as a means of punctuating and extending this analysis: 'In every state of emergency there is emergence.' Here Bhabha's political insight opens up a space in which we can both recast and stretch the possibilities of independents. The demands and social responsibilities are quite direct: black filmmakers have to rethink the political/cultural agenda, together with the possible strategic engagements for ensuring the continuation of independent film practice. It appears highly problematic to converge a politics of cultural resistance, as is practised by our diverse communities, without the prioritising of the real specificity of film production. In other words there is a danger that cultural resistance can be romanticised and thus reduced to an essentialist discourse of political practice.

If the concept 'cultural resistance' is to retain any analytical status, it will have to be substantially reworked in order effectively to address the structural crisis of the 80s.



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In our view multiple contestations and concrete relations, in combination with the institutional shift within the media industries, may just constitute the albatross round the neck of romantic and essentialist readings of cultural resistance.

The conceptual binary of power/knowledge is not a given, nor does it represent static epistemological categories. As a couplet, it is historically contingent because of the different power relations and knowledge productions that exist in discourse. Therefore, the debate can be most productive when it is linked to conjunctural relations of the media institutions, and the workshops' relationship to them.

Thus it is the specificity of conjunctural forces that should inform the manner in which 1) emergence takes place and 2) the political and cultural agendas can be drawn up. These are some of the strategic considerations that should contribute to film practitioners' overall understanding of the dynamic shifts occurring in the sector, and do to some extent determine the possibility of black independents. Workshops can only construct a viable challenge to the apparatus of dominant cinema when we have thoroughly and vigorously analysed the actual political economy of cultural production in this post-GLC<sup>1</sup> conjunctural terrain, where many are still recovering from the post-abolition blues. In fact the politics of abolition have effectively inscribed film-makers into a different amalgam of social relations where institutional, local state cultural policies, and central government are forcing independent film producers to reassess the edifice of cultural production.

### Third Cinema

The conceptual apparatus called 'Third Cinema' is very broad. The manner in which the concept is loosely deployed means that it is progressively in danger of abandoning its analytical potency. In invoking the term Third Cinema practice, film artists in Britain must be politically astute to recognise that Third Cinema in its classical dimension does not exist in Britain. However, those film-makers who remain adamant about its existence should at least give recognition to its infancy.

Although there are historical reasons as to why we are in agreement with the theoretical explorations of Third Cinema practitioners from Glauba Rocha to Safi Faye, we also believe in giving privilege to historical and geographical contexts in the formation of our film sense. Independent film producers of the diaspora have a historical /cultural task which is to extend the boundaries of cinema as an apparatus capable of



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1. In 1986 the Greater London Council and other metropolitan councils were abolished by the Conservative government. The councils, and the GLC in particular, had been a major source of support for emergent as well as established cultural practices.

articulating our vision of the social world. Therefore, it is absolutely redundant to reproduce the filmic categories and organising principles of Third Cinema theory in the metropolitan centres, for this amounts to an intellectual disservice to those who for many years mentally and physically laboured to make it a viable proposition within a particular geographical context.

Debates around Third Cinema have not in my view sufficiently addressed developments in the cinema by diasporic subjects living and working in the metropolitan centres of London, Paris, New York etc. Thus it becomes immensely problematic when films from Britain are incorporated into this all-embracing conceptual framework called Third Cinema practice. Such a process does not allow adequate space for a critical evaluation of the distinctiveness of films emerging from Britain and other Western metropolitan centres. That level of analysis and critical reflection is most needed.

However, I believe that a tentative relationship does exist between Third Cinema in the Third World and that which is in the process of becoming in Britain's black communities, but the principle of reciprocity is such that it forces both a contingency and a mediacy. In our attempt to develop an alternative visual grammar it is imperative that we acknowledge influences other than that of Third Cinema. It is precisely that plurality of film form, of narrative techniques and our sense of the kind of cinema that we wish to develop, that distinguish our work from that of Latin America, Africa and India.

An intervention in visual culture that is capable of articulating the diasporic condition has to proceed from political, cultural and historical specificities, not from general filmic criteria or abstract formulations. Black film practitioners in Britain occupy a specific historical space, and it is one that has been forged by our particular experiences of race, politics and cinema aesthetics in Britain. It is only through a process of experimentation that there can be new developments in film techniques, new criteria for visual representation and new voices in cinema. Only then can we make genuine claims to have made any significant contributions to that large and impressive body of work by film-makers of the 'periphery'. We should first and foremost recognise that there is a syncretic process occurring in the area of film culture, and it should be given its due celebration. Given the level of social uncertainty that presently exists in this crisis-ridden political and cultural matrix, it is important that film practitioners repoliticise the technological apparatus of visual representation. Politicisation can occur in the production process itself: that sovereign space where film-makers can radicalise the representations of gender, sexuality and the archaeologies of black subjectivity. Black

## Twilight City

THE FILM UNFOLDS WITH A SERIES OF PERSONAL MEDITATIONS BETWEEN A WEST INDIAN WOMAN EUGENIA AND HER DAUGHTER OLIVIA WHO IS CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON THE CREATION OF WEALTH IN LONDON.

IN 1979 AFTER 35 YRS OF LONDON LIFE EUGENIA RETURNED TO DOMINICA TO <sup>LIVE OUT HER</sup> ~~ASIDE~~ <sup>RETIREMENT</sup> HER LAST DAYS.

(1989) AFTER TEN YRS OF SILENCE EUGENIA WRITES TO HER DAUGHTER <sup>IN 1979</sup> WITH A DECLARATION OF RETURN TO ~~LONDON~~ THE LONDON OF HER MEMORIES. SHE WANTS TO RETURN AND SHE WANTS TO BE INVITED.

IN REPLY OLIVIA'S LETTER TO HER MOTHER UNCOVERS THE ~~PAST~~ <sup>SECRET</sup> LONDON OF THE

THE CITY'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE; TWILIGHT CITY IS A DOCUMENTARY EXPLORATION OF A HALF FORGOTTEN LONDON AND THE NEW <sup>CITY</sup> LONDON BEING BORN <sup>OUT OF</sup> ASHES OF 1980'S. WHAT EMERGES IS A WORLD OF CHILD HOOD MEMORIES, PERSONAL AND PUBLIC TESTIMONIES, SEXUAL INTERCROSSINGS AND THE CITY'S DISPOSSESSED ENTRAPPED IN THE NEW LONDON.

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204. Poster, *Twilight City*, 1989  
Design: BAFC

205. Musical visualisation for electronic synthesiser soundtrack, *Twilight City*, Trevor Mathison, 1989

206. Contact sheet, *Twilight City*, 1989

207. Contact sheet, *Twilight City*, 1989

208. Outline for *Twilight City*, Reece Auguiste, 1989



209. Trevor Mathison in the studio for the *Twilight City* soundtrack, 1989

210–12. Musical visualisation, Trevor Mathison, 1989

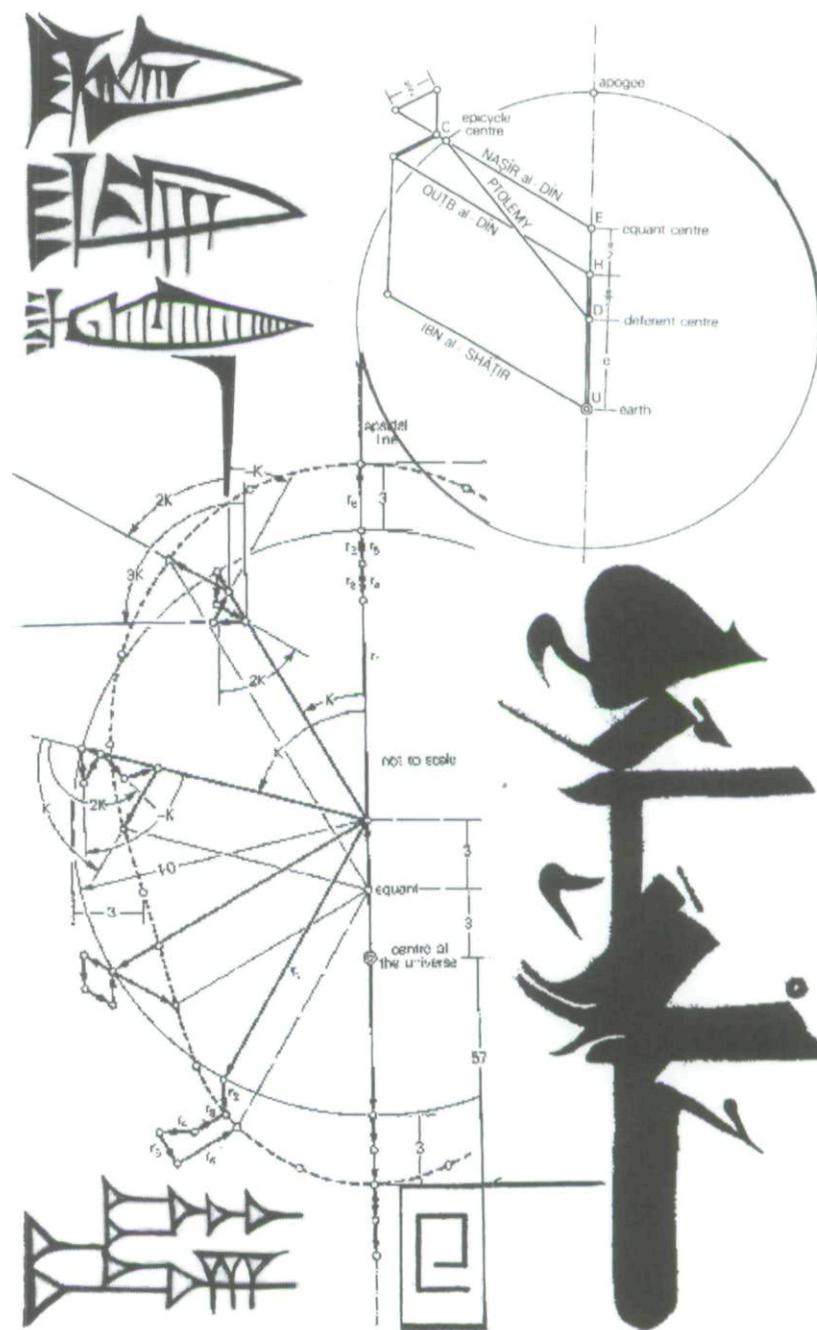
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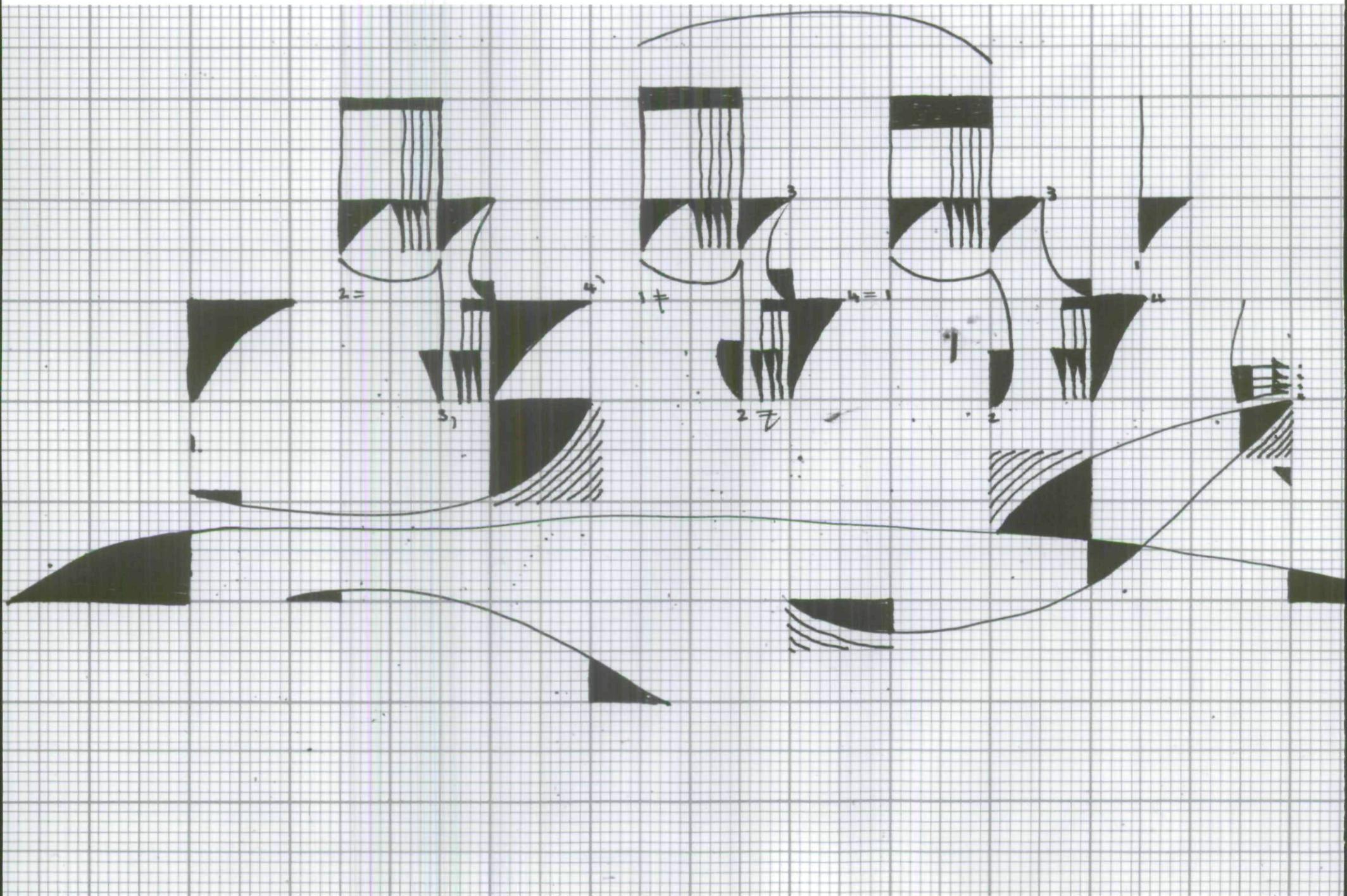
workshops occupy a field of practice, theory and analysis. We are thus engaged with cinema as a technological mode of production, as a constellation of institutional conflict, wars of shifting positions, and as a systematising of the ways in which sound, image, colour and movement signify.

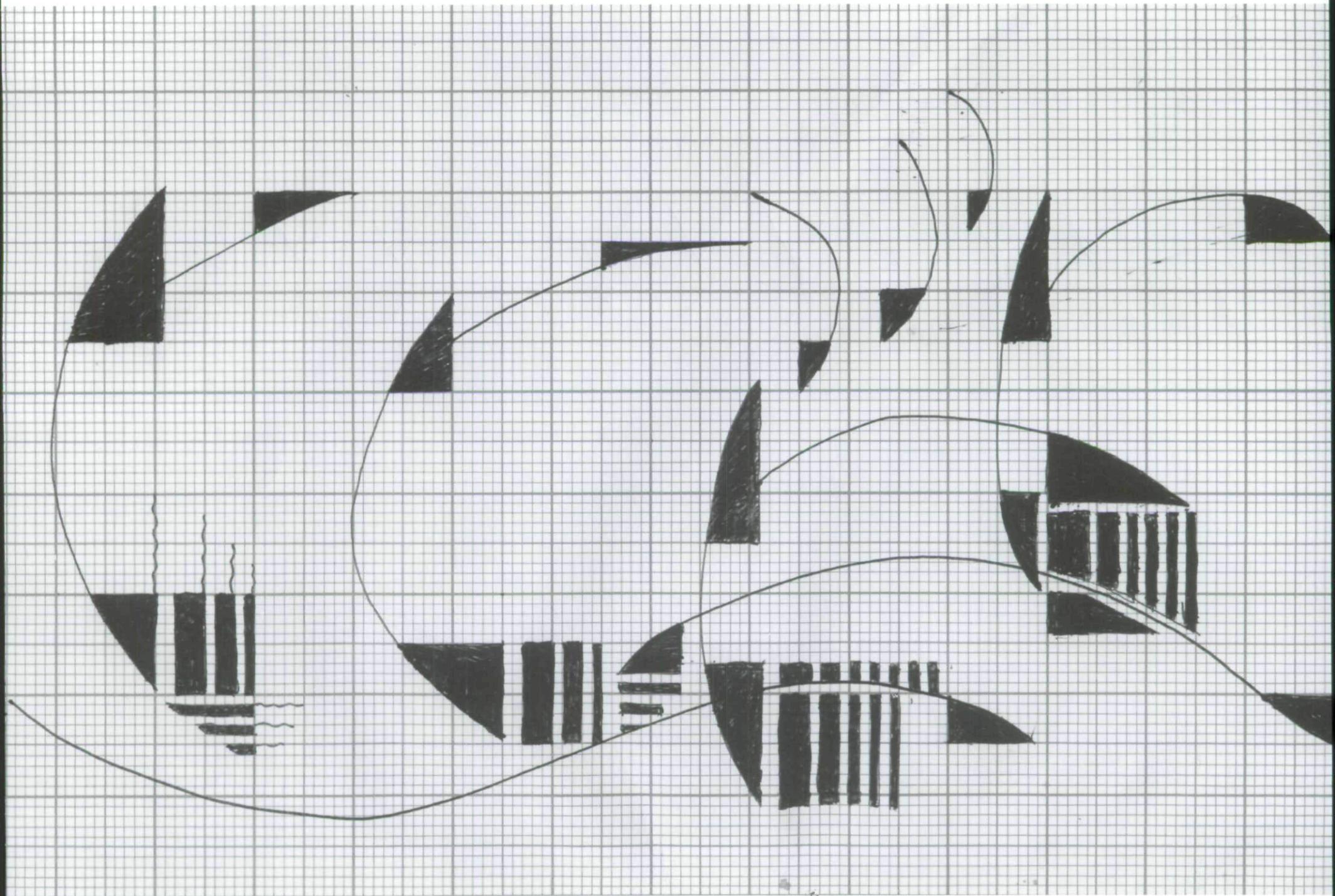
Tentatively, this field constitutes an interrelated voice of multiple concerns, a voice given presences and framed by questions of technological, institutional and signifiatory battles, a war of meaning, a cinema of signification. The conditions of existence experienced by workshops imply that film-makers of the sector should utilise every technology of visual production that is available to them. That would of course demand an increased use of so-called marginal formats, like for example Super-Eight film. This also demands that an interdisciplinary approach to film-making should inform one's conception of film practice; it is a question of building a particular audio-visual style. Since its inception, Black Audio Film Collective has endeavoured to build a critical language, a grammar of precision, of movement and fluidity. It is a task that we feel will contribute to the enrichment of black independent film culture. An inter-disciplinary approach which is both constructive and engaging eradicates any conception which poses itself as a monolithic discourse of form. Indeed, our film *Handsworth Songs* is an attempt to problematise notions of narrative structure and form, questions concerning the parameters of black aesthetics and in particular the racial economy of signs.

Diasporic cinema should be a cinema of appearances, evoking and marking new inscriptions. The value of this cinema in terms of the development of independent film culture is immense. Our task should be that of developing a cinema which has a multiplicity of configurations, of identities and histories, of rewriting visual styles and evoking a dialogue between technology, class, gender and language. Given that our presence in the metropolitan centres has been forged out of unequal relationships between the centre and the periphery of post-colonial contradictions and presences, we passionately believe that it is apt to further inscribe meaning into those presences. A presence spoken through a system of knowledge, because there are no dark continents of meaning and there are no dark continents of cinema untouched by an aesthetic of presence. The issue is that of producing new forms of aesthetics, of visual styles and experimentation with clear-cut political and social objectives that can contribute to the development of an art form so young as the cinema.

In this manner, sound and image may assume new life and signification as one of the organising metaphors of black cinema in Britain. Diasporic film-makers can learn from the insights of Indian film-maker Kumar Shahani: 'to open up the language, to reveal every articulation in reality by revealing every articulation in the form.' This, I believe, should be one of our many tasks and responsibilities as film-makers of the diaspora.









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I come to questions of colour via fine art and film-making. My understandings of colour, having lived for 25 years now in England, emerged from being a student trying to make films, and through art history. In that kind of world, there are clear traditions by which one understands colour. A very obvious example of this relates to the standard art historical account of red and of blue. In nineteenth-century colour theory, red comes forward and blue recedes. I have always understood them to be in some ways polar opposites, giving us differing definitions of space. My interest in colour in Ghana specifically started while making preparations for *Testament*, a film about memory. What surprised me was to find a universe in which colour meant other things. It was a shock to begin work in Ghana and to find that there was another universe in which you place the two colours together because they speak the same thing. I think what one is talking about is a universe in which red and blue speak in the same language with the same intensity but from different vantage points. I do not think you can say that about red and blue in the nineteenth-century colour field. The definitions of space provided by both are very, very distinct. One is about distance and providing foreground and so on, and one is about providing background. One recedes and one comes towards you. So to approach questions of colour with a Ghanaian inheritance means, in a way, undergoing a particular kind of transformation in which you are willing to suspend disbelief in your

## COLOUR SYMBOLISM IN GHANAIAN SOCIETY

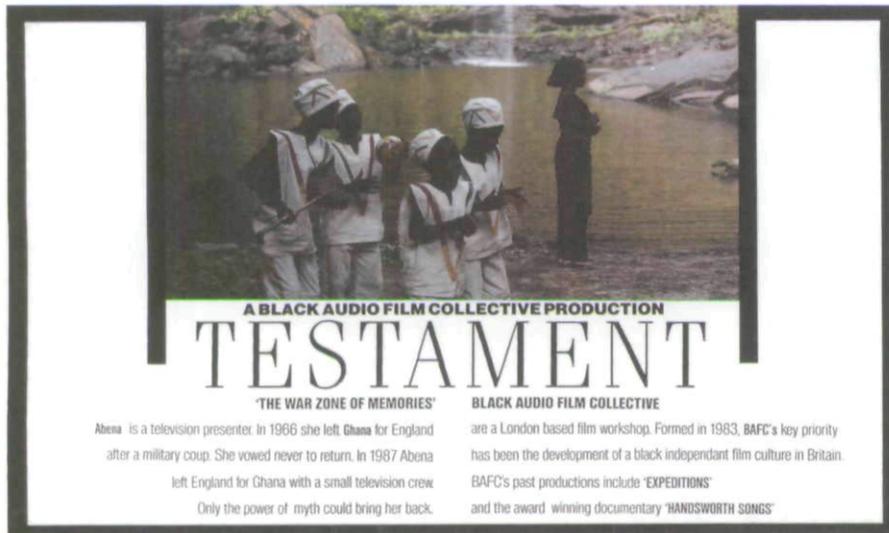
JOHN AKOMFRAH

INTERVIEWED BY LINA GOPAUL

own understanding of colour, momentarily. I think that at some point they come together again, but momentarily one has to forget what the nineteenth century offers.

The ideas that *Testament* was trying to deal with were, on the whole, intangible ones, of mourning, of loss and death. It became clear in the course of trying to devise a structural narrative for this film that one would be missing a lot if one did not pay attention, in some ways, to how the 'tribes' understood the organisation and operation of colour. In our investigation of colour it became clear that, traditionally, colours have been used in very specific ways to describe the two extremes of human life – birth and death. If you go searching for rituals that are associated with these two extremes you come up against colour. Death, for example has three very central colours: black, blue and red. Those colours were always confined to rituals of mourning so that the rituals are almost synonymous with those colours. It is very difficult to make sense of those colours without referring to the key rituals with which they are now intertwined and vice versa.

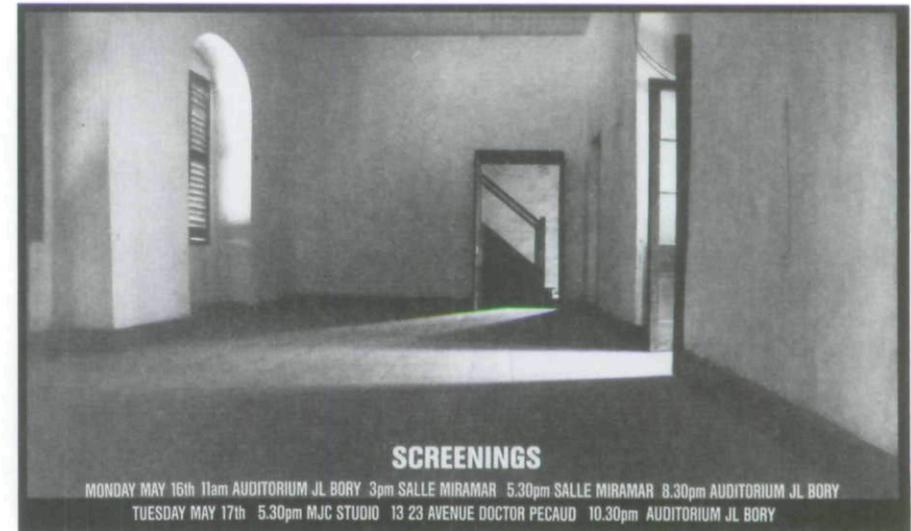
Red, blue or black can be broken down to describe the different kinds of death that a particular mourning session would take up. If you go to a funeral you would find people in red and for those people there would be a kind of anger about the fact that



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the person is dead. Those wearing blue are probably relatives who are so shocked they really do not want to express anything more than just a kind of muted but dignified silence. The majority will be in black, black being a much more public, collective definition of mourning. So with some minimal understanding of colour, you can, in some ways, understand the space of death and how that space is organised at a funeral. Now what interested me was the question of why those colours predominated in those celebrations. What is it about them that lends themselves to be appropriated in that way for ritual. I do not think I am close enough to answering that yet; all one can say at this stage is that there are a number of tributaries of thoughts and ideas through which different definitions and different understandings of colour have entered into the everyday in Ga society. It is not accidental; it is not mere coincidence, when you find out that, for example, up until the fifteenth century, the Gas made sacrificial blood offerings to the key deity of the tribe. At a certain point the deity was seduced and tricked into taking shark blood or tuna blood because it could not distinguish it from human blood.

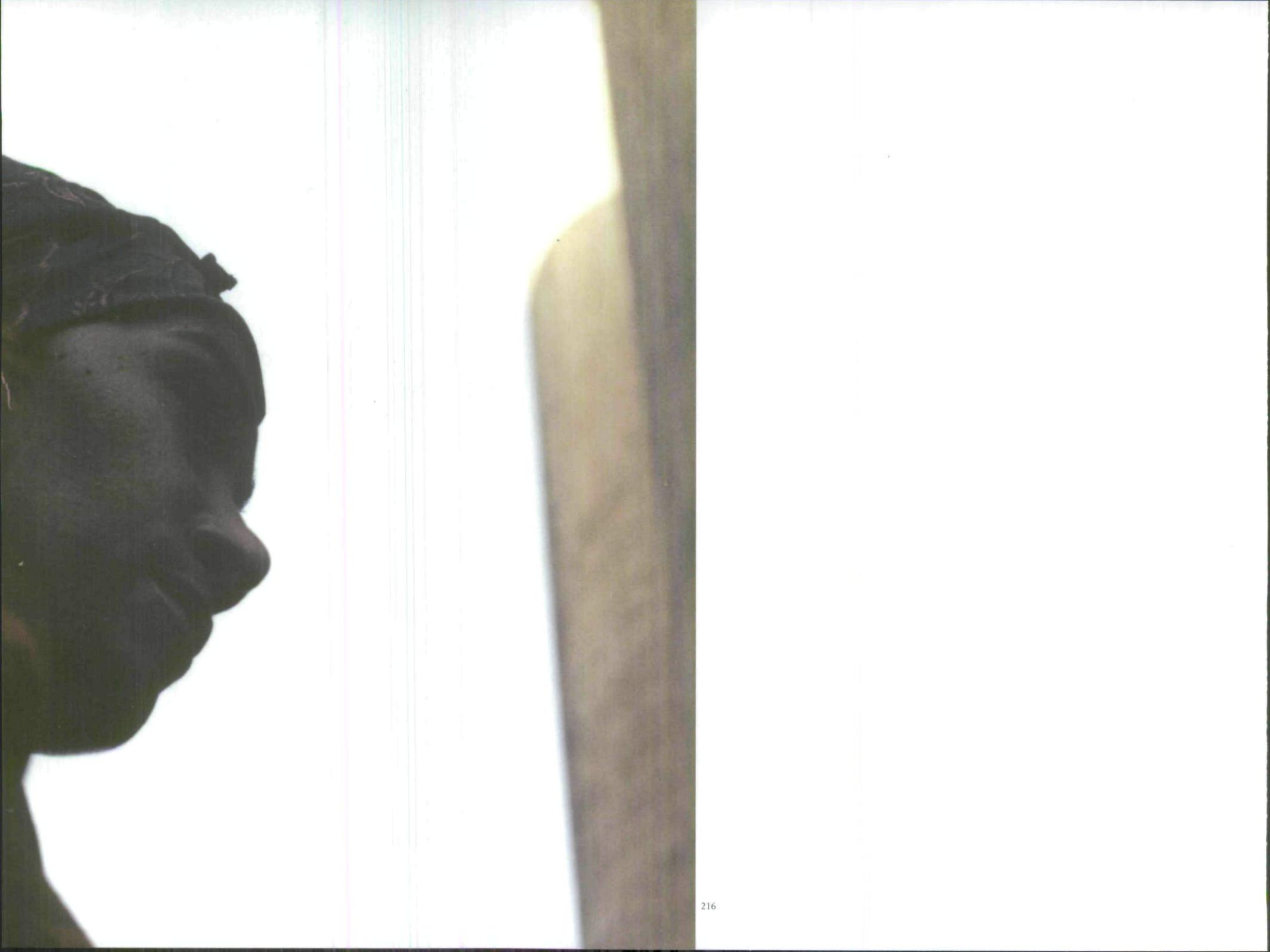
So I think in a way part of the use of red in Ga society masks a certain dishonesty. A public exhibition of a certain shame for having participated in this trickery. And yet



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undermining that shame is also the understanding that red really is a colour of permanence, a colour of defiance because it is the colour of blood. It is not easy but one can draw a line from the offering of sacrificial blood, at a particular moment, to these uses of that colour as a way of singing death out of the tribe and with it the burden of the past. It comes to stand for a way of banishing both shame and death to the margins of that society.

It is not quite so easy to do the same sort of archaeological investigation of blue. But I think you cannot understand the predominance of blue without also understanding the fact that for long periods of time, really up to the middle part of the twentieth century, the chief occupation of men in that tribe was going out to sea. They would spend long hours of the day, I suppose most of the day really, fishing. They would start at dawn and they probably would not come back till about three or four in the afternoon just in time to then sell the produce. When you take into account the fact that they have thought enough about the significance of the sea to attempt to offer produce of the sea to their deity as sacrifice – if people are prepared to go that far in securing a certain kind of understanding of their life through the sea then we can begin to see the ways in which the sea would have played more symbolic functions in their lives as well. So red and blue entered into the everyday via ritual and in some ways, up until now, they have





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both been kept in the everyday on the margins, specifically for celebrations, for mourning and for ritual.

Black is that much more difficult to deal with but I think one has to be aware that black itself has this central prominence in tribal life of West and East African religion. With most societies in East and West Africa, you will find the existence of black material. People would wear it normally; it need not be associated with death at all. But in Ghana it is very unusual to find the use of black material in any other way except to do with death. That may have to do with the fact that traditional symbols for describing the activities, the names and the principal functions of the deities in Ashanti society are always represented in black. The Adninkra symbols, which one thinks of as oracles, as voices of the dead and the supernatural, are traditionally always represented in black. So in a way you can understand why, symbolically, that colour could be appropriated for rituals of mourning and loss. It is already part of the universe and the ritualistic.

I have talked a lot about death. The other extreme is to do with birth. I am using birth in a much looser, much more generic sense of the term, in terms of festivities which are to do with harvesting, the emergence of the first day of the Ga season, the deity celebrations which are to do with the arrival of the gods in that society. There will

be specific days in which people of that tribe will be literally possessed. There is no other description, no other word that describes the activity, any more effectively. People will be possessed and they will come out and speak the voices of the dead, the ancient ones.

When they do, they are always in white. I know of no occasions where a person has been possessed when they are not in that material. There is a particular chalk which the Gas call 'ayiloh'. That chalk has to be daubed onto the face, the arms and so on and trinkets have to be worn, most of which again are white. So literally, from head to foot, people would have to be covered in these ornaments and daubed in white, and that would be the way in which the tribe accommodates its understanding of the most important thing in its life – its gods and its voices of the dead, which organise life much more effectively than anything of the present. That knowledge can only really be consumed at the ritual festivities of the Woulumei and Wuloyei – the men and women of the gods – who are represented in this colour.

The colour also has other kinds of functions because once it becomes the organising principle around which people make sense of life, anything to do with the affirmation of life then has to go through that colour. If you want to marry somebody there are particular things you have to bring. One of which would be the material white, or if you

213. John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Ridley Road, 1992

214. Card, *Testament*, 1988. Design: BAFC

215. Card, *Testament*, 1988. Design: BAFC

216. Tania Rogers as Abena, grain silo complex, Tema, Ghana, *Testament*, 1988

217. Emma Francis Wilson as Danso, *Testament*, 1988

offend somebody, if you offend the gods for example, by doing something terrible and you want to be spared, you would also be expected to bring a piece of this white material.

In a way, the society itself is organised according to ancient bureaucracies, and these bureaucracies are hemmed in by two extremes. The extremes are really to do with the preoccupation with birth and with death in metaphoric terms, but also in quite literal terms. These two central preoccupations also have around them, almost as a sort of barrier between them and the living, a barrier between them and the everyday particular kinds of colour. What is interesting is why birth only has one colour and death three; I suppose if you have lived in a society which is perennially on the point of danger because the tribe itself is so used to constantly being attacked, death becomes much more important, in a way, than birth. That might partly explain it, but it is still interesting to think that there are societies in which, from the Egyptian Book of the Dead onwards, death has probably meant more than life, but in a paradoxical way. The only reason why that is the case is because people use death as a kind of yardstick for life so that the fascination of death is not an entirely morbid one. In many ways it is a kind of affirmation of life, because what I think people are trying to do there is to understand the boundaries of life and in doing so reap the most rewards from it.

One of the things which is interesting to find out about red, apart from being associated with this transition from being a cannibalistic society to being a much more civilised one, is the fact that for a long period of time the colour red was also associated with the menstrual cycle. Traditionally women used red cloth as a menstrual cloth. The only time that one saw red was at those times in the month when the cycle was obviously in operation, and then one would see bits of red hanging on lines and so on. I think if you take the obsession with blood as a sort of sacrificial offering to the God with this very private drama of the menstrual cycle, then between the two of them these rites effectively managed to banish the colour red into a kind of intimacy, the intimacy of myth, or the intimacy of women's lives, the solitude of women's lives, and effectively kept it there.

One saw very, very little public everyday display of the colour red, as a tie, a costume, without some attempt to disguise the fact, that here is red in its full splendour as it were. One rarely saw an example of that. I remember – being somebody who has lived in this country for almost 25 years, and having become increasingly sensitive to the question of colour and the importance of it – being taken aback at a wedding on a recent visit where I saw somebody dressed in a sort of pink, which from a distance could be



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218. John Akomfrah, *Testament*, 1988

219. Elmina Castle, Cape Coast, Ghana, 1988

construed as red. I think on the whole a lot of people, older ones especially, probably still find that slightly disturbing. I am not saying that in a way red is still banished or anything, but it seems to me that certain colours achieve a kind of taboo value or status and once they do that you are effectively in the realms of metaphysics and it is very difficult to then wrestle colour away from that dimension and give it significance in the everyday. I think in a way the colour red is hemmed in by those two dramas in Ga society.

It is interesting to note that the national flags for a large number of countries in Africa have the colours red, gold and green. There you find attempts made by national government at the point of nationhood to give another kind of expression to the colour red, to give it a more national expression without attempting to rob it of its ethnic, spiritual or metaphysical value. I remember reading somewhere that in fact, when the colours in the Ghanaian flag are broken down, red indeed talks about blood. It is about the blood that we have shed when we have fought for nationhood. It is a very easy transition in that sense to make because of course for hundreds of years Ghanaian women have shed, literally shed, blood for that country. On the other hand I think the difference between the two is important to establish because if the colour is capable of speaking nationally in that way, it also means then that in a way people are not prisoners of the earlier, more private ritual. Given another kind of authority that is capable of organising itself around a colour in a way in which people don't feel threatened by, it is then possible for people to inhabit a world in which their loyalty to tribe and loyalty to nation can be organised by the same symbol, the same colour without any problems.



## EXPEDITIONS: ON RACE AND NATION

BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE



### NOUGHT: THE MOMENT

*August 1891*

Picture me there, a dazed missionary, listening to those dream-tellers. Listening and wondering, listening and wandering, with one foot in the grave.

We await classification; we are not traders, not raiders, therefore, he cannot get at us, cannot 'place' us. The only category he can conceive is that of 'the people who live by doing nothing'.

He is a withered old man, disconcerted, scrutinous, quizzing incredulously, with one foot in the grave.

### ONE: ... AND THE ARCHIVE

**Expeditions** is an engagement with the mythologies around which national identity is secured. The central concern is to investigate the fictions of national character as they are produced through the excesses of colonial fantasy.

**Expeditions** follows the operations of colonial discourse in its living-death throes (Thatcher's 'swamping' speech), its moments of transmutation (Gaitskell's hopes for the new Commonwealth), and its morbid multiple births – Amritsar, Liverpool 1919, Bahia 1808, South Africa 1951, London 1981.

It is a poem on remembrance, and the art of forgetting anew.

### TWO: NAMING THE MOMENT

**Expeditions** prioritizes archival reading. A kind of returning to the source, privileging archival moments as instances whereby we can grind the tempo of colonial discourse almost to a halt, paring its parts down into a genealogy of colonial narratives. An inventory of such moments might include the following:

(1) The zoological/Cuvierian moment. Best exemplified in the classificatory works of the French biologist Cuvier, Thomas Carlyle's 'Discourse on the Nigger Question', and the speeches and writings of Enoch Powell.

(2) The eugenic/Darwinist moment, in which the two necessary examples are Edward Long's two-volume **History of Jamaica**, and the statistician Francis Galton's



pronouncements on selection of character.

(3) The evangelical/expeditionary moment. Consider here the 'Missionary Research Series' published during the 1880s, and the eve of 1601, when Queen Elizabeth I signed and sealed the charter of the East India Company which raised the curtain for Britain's Indian Empire.

(4) The millenarian/redemptionist moment, in which we turn our attention to the writings of the abolitionist society: Wilberforce and Sharpe, particularly, and the memoirs of Captain Crow of the **Kitty Amelia**, 'the last English slaver to sail legally'.

### THREE: YOU WILL BE MINE

#### 1882

Twilight over the Niger, a remembrance: 'My dream, as a child, was to colour the map of Africa red.' Sir George Taubman Goldie, standing before the Niger, which he liked to think of as his own.

He sees us reading. He awakes as from a nightmare to discover that the whole of his past experiences have returned. And even as he lapsed into half-sleep, we recorded and transcribed his fantasies. He sees us reading.

Colonial discourse is an anxious rhetoric. And this anxiety is precisely to do with its negation of its pretensions to civility. This ambivalence perpetually performs a displacing, splitting function – just when we thought the European was a creature of Enlightenment, we discover him to be a barbarian.

#### 1889

Dr. D. Crawford, FRGS, traveller for twenty-two years without a break, in the long grass of Central Africa, looks at a photograph of an African with her hands cut off. The good doctor pauses. With slow, unshakable resolve he says, 'it is not the hands that steal, but the heart'.

In looking at colonial discourse through specific moments, it is possible to identify key rhetorics through which notions of a national character are defined and reworked. Rhetorics of becoming, rhetorics of loss ...

In the settlement of Virginia, begun by Sir Walter Raleigh, established by Lord de la Mere ... these attempts completely failed. Nearly half the colony was destroyed by

savages ... and famine. The rest, consumed and worn down by fatigue ... deserted the colony and returned home ... in despair ...

... there we can see the colonial discourse as the supreme overinvestment in the minimal demand. It simply states, 'I want you.'

... then again, the circulations of power and authority with which that demand is made are always excessive: 'I want your body, your soil, your labour, your soul, your love.' A conflation of land and flesh, fear and desire.

#### FOUR: THINKING BLACK

'Remember, **you** are the stranger.'

*January 1900*

Frederick Lugard, the 'father of Nigeria', begins his governing of the new colony. 'The vast majority of the inhabitants were not only completely unaware that they had been allocated to Britain, but were ignorant of its very existence.'

**Expeditions** looks at how colonial discourse builds an orature of identification between social subjects and narratives. Between myth parading as essence, and essence parading as national character, is the oratorical 'We' and 'They' of nationhood's discourse of colonial mastery: **Thinking Black**.

In **Thinking Black**, the Portuguese can invest in distilling a specific rum, aptly called 'Nigger Killer', for export to Africa.

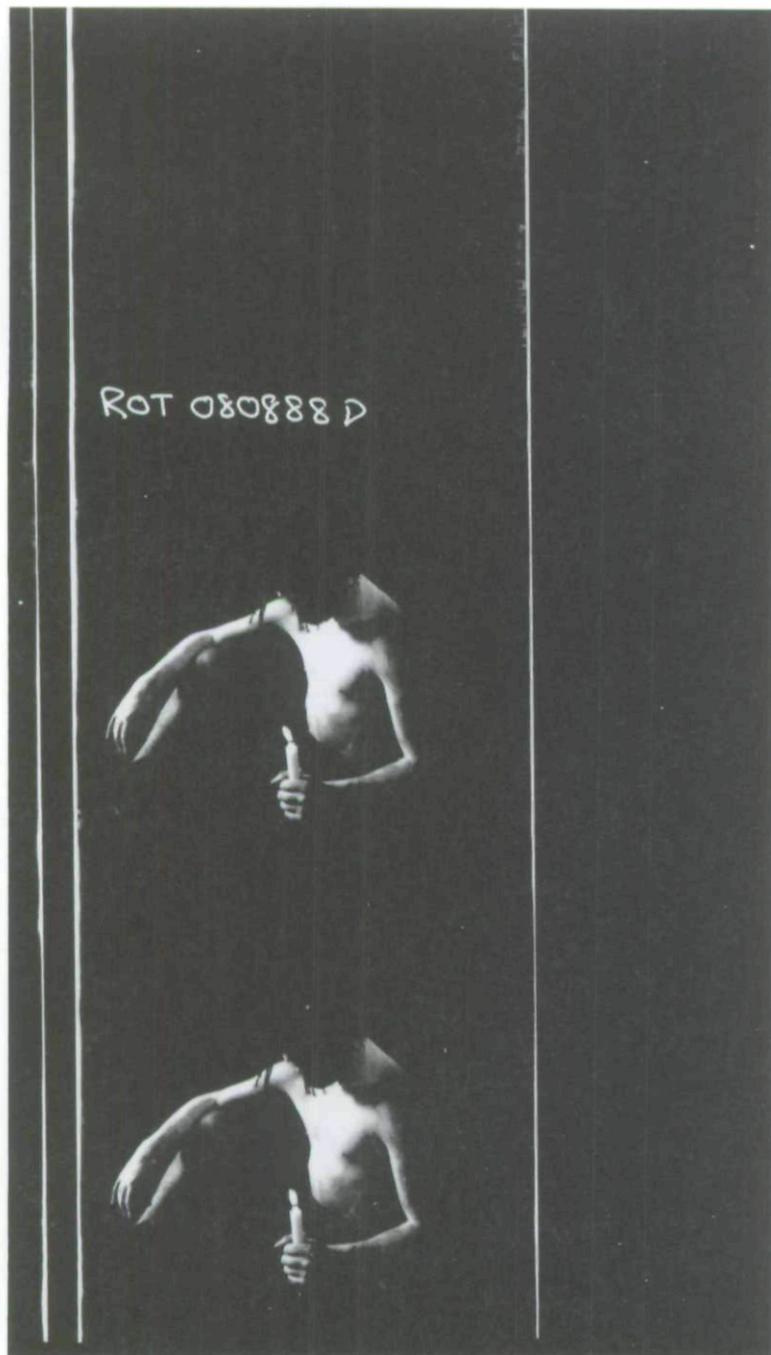
In **Thinking Black**, a nineteenth-century ethnographer sits by the window of his Bloomsbury study. On his desk, photographs of two African women. He scribbles across one, 'A typical mop head-dress', across the other, 'Mere barbarism disgusts – it is the unnatural union of savagery and civilization that is ugly and painful.'

In **Thinking Black** the illustrator/writer of 'The ABC of Baby Patriots' reaches the ninth letter: "'I' is for India, Our land in the East, where everyone goes to shoot tigers and feast.' Reaching the letter 23, a baby patriot reads: "'W' is the word of an Englishman true: when given, it means what he says he'll do.'

The father of Nigeria continues with flat surety: 'They cannot know who they are, or what they are.'

#### SIGNS OF EMPIRE- BAFC

- 1) Signs of Empire
- 2) An investigation into Colonial fantasy
- 3) In the beginning
- 4) The textual
- 5) The archive
- 6) Imperialism
- 7) In the beginning
- 8) The winter-lands of narrative
- 9) -
- 10) -
- 11) The impossible fiction of tradition
- 12) -
- 13) The treatise
- 14) In National identity
- 15) -
- 16) A the decanted autobiography of empire
- 17) -
- 18) -
- 19) The rhetoric of race
- 20) -
- 21) fissure in popular memory
- 22) -
- 23) The anxieties of colonial rhetoric
- 24) -
- 25) -
- 26) Business
- 27) -
- 28) -
- 29) -
- 30) -
- 31) -
- 32) -
- 33) Trace
- 34) -
- 35) Condensation
- 36) -
- 37) Fetish
- 38) -
- 39) Erasure
- 40) -
- 41) Signature
- 42) -
- 43) fixation
- 44) -
- 45) Chorus



220. Trevor Mathison, Reece Auguiste, John Akomfrah, *Visions and Revisions* course, 1984

221. Contact sheet, *Twilight City*, 1989

222. Script, *Signs of Empire*, 1982–84

223–24. Contact sheet, *Twilight City*, 1989

## FIVE: BEYOND THE SEA: A NEW BRITAIN

The delirium of becoming: a moment caught between myth and history.

What we need to ask is, what regime of truth governs these sentiments?

Now known as Konga Vantu, Dr. D. Crawford, FRGS, author of **Thinking Black**, gives the game away. Having stood for twenty-two years in what he calls 'the malarial mouth of the Congo', Doctor Crawford has this to say about the native:

Take the negro now, and watch a curious thing. I mean that hard, impersonal stare of those bottomless-eyed natives, not the intense penetrating thing of Europe. You might be something worked on tapestry or painted on a china cup, so impersonally does he look at you.

The good doctor has discovered himself and, consequently, England.

There, in that monster mouth of the Congo. Yawning seven miles wide and vomiting its dirty contents into the blue Atlantic. There, I say, you see the sad and symbolic story of the decadence on the west coast of Africa. For the fearful fact has to be faced that all things European degenerate in central Africa – European provisions go bad, European fruits, European dogs degenerate. So too, European men and women.

The grace of unbecoming: between force and meaning, a moment, caught.

## SIX: DO NARRATIVES DIE?

**Signs of Empire** and **Images of Nationality** trace the conglomerate of signs which structure national identity, in their transformation from old chains of signification, to the geopolitical indiscretions which organize contemporary subjectivities. New jokes are spoken through old; old fictions are reborn as morbid truths.

**1981**

London. QC Sir Ronald Bell (RIP) hisses quietly on the BBC **Panorama** studio set. On the screen behind him, film footage of civil disorder in 1980s Britain. His lips part in a smile to the camera and the rotting teeth belong to Sir Patrick Luard. They gesture in ghastly unison to the screen:

If you look at their faces ... I think they don't know who they are or what they are. And really, what you're asking me is how the hell one gives them the kind of sense of belonging young Englishmen have.

I'm sitting in my front room. I look at his face on the screen. His face looks back at me. Seeing only partial presence, I am reminded of Fanon's words:

Not only must the black person be black: s/he must be black in relation to the white man.

**August 1891**

They don't know who they are, or what they are ...

The desert stretches before the missionary. He continues to sit and listen to the wind whistling through the sand. 'Through them, we know what we are not, and therefore what we are is always unstable.'

He sees dancing figures as the sands eat into him. 'What is this, if not the desert turning poet?'



## ON WRITING WHO NEEDS A HEART

JOHN AKOMFRAH

225. Edward George, Portsmouth Polytechnic, 1981

226. Contact sheet, The Manor House location shoot, *Who Needs A Heart*, Royston, Hertfordshire, UK, 1991



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*The individual is not the sum of his common impressions but of his unusual.*

Gaston Bachelard

When we started the research for this film I felt the need to write something down which summed up the spirit of the project: a private memo to be used as a guide for our search. So I wrote this down:

- a. What is the film about – Michael De Freitas, his loves, passions, influences, shortcomings and failures.
- b. Why? Because whether we like it or not all the above provide a significant picture of the turbulence which engulfed, sustained, gave feature and figure to black life in England in the 1960s.

In getting to know Michael we are beginning the hard work of self examination. To do this we need to privilege ambiguity, complexities and contradictions.

Halfway through the research I began to think that our focus was misplaced; that we shouldn't just be looking at Michael. So then I tried to understand by writing the following: To make a biographical film is to ask to be possessed; it's like asking to be haunted by the traces and deposits of another life. The film becomes a way of reliving experiences;

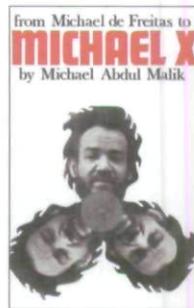
you the film-maker accept the responsibility for living another life all over again. You ask the dead to surrender to you their right to oblivion. You go into their crypt because you want to become them. But this process is necessarily incomplete. All you do in fact is inherit their 'voice'. You are possessed by it. The problem is that since that 'voice' is necessarily caught between the past and the present it is always in the process of becoming. It never quite surrenders its independence, never quite yields to you. That is its power, its magic. Now when you understand this you do one of two things. You either pretend you're still in charge; still telling the 'true story' and you end up making a dishonest film like *Scandal*. Or you decide to do 'something else'.

In *Who Needs A Heart*, Edward George and myself set out to do 'something else'. The first (thing) was to write a script which dealt with the enigma of Michael X by looking at him through his impact on other relationships and lives.

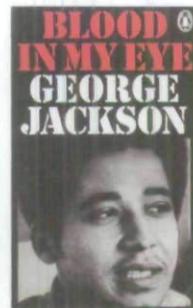
In searching for the truth of the story of Michael X we had found it impossible to separate the man from the legend. Much of what we assumed to be real events turned out to be a mixture of myth and hearsay.



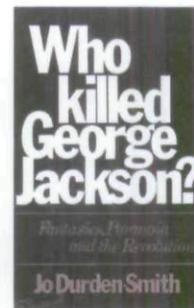
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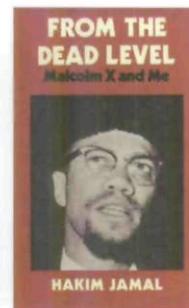
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What we found was not a story but a sort of illustrated history of gestures. Gestures which a group of real men and women – black and white – used to plan their lives. We gradually came to understand that Michael De Freitas, alias Michael X, alias Michael Abdul Malik was very important in the inventing of these gestures.

So *Who Needs A Heart* shifted away from a political biography of Michael X to a more archaeological project on gestures involving: sex, crime, jazz, religion, rhetoric, uniform, romance and race.

We decided that each scene would explore one or more of these gestures as it was being formed or invented; that we would place the playing out of this drama of gesture in recognisably 'domestic' settings; that we would allow these gestures to define the course our characters would take. The only limits we placed on this freewheeling process were:

1. That each of the characters we came up with had to be created out of the month of viewing and interviewing that we had done.
2. Each one also had to be based on a facet or nuance of Michael's persona.

After that we started writing.

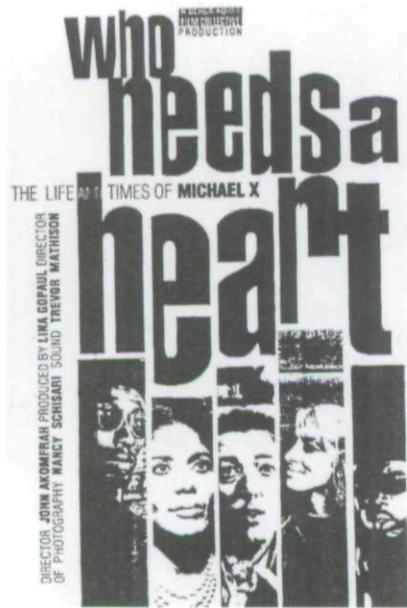
227. Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 1969

228. Michael Abdul Malik, *From Michael de Freitas to Michael X*, 1968

229. George Jackson, *Blood in my Eye*, 1971

230. Jo Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson? Fantasies, Paranoia and the Revolution*, 1976

231. Hakim Jamal, *From the Dead Level: Malcolm X and Me*, 1971



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## NOTATIONS OF COLLECTIVE INVENTIONS FOR WHO NEEDS A HEART

JOHN AKOMFRAH

- P01 1965** (didn't realise Naomi was a pastor).
- P21 1965** Rehearsing to music(?) of the period.
- P23 1965** What's going on? It's about constructing each other's identities.

The first level we are confronted with is that of Artifice/Ambiguity.

The moment of the film is ambiguity – an ambiguity of place – about who belongs where – a moment of flux. People figuring who they're going to be on a day-to-day basis.

(break)

The group then started talking about memories of how they dealt with race/differences/racisms – a divergence.

Shift from racist figure to becoming the person who 'made it'.

- # 68** The sixties as moment for free-thinking expression, sexual liberation, yes or no. Is that what's happening here? Why does the scene take



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place in a church? He can't afford an organ. They're liberated to the degree that they can all go to the church and do this? Scope of 'innocence' a belief that communication across boundaries is possible.

It's significant that Naomi and Sydney don't go.

Church – public space / held – public space – cross burning.  
Church of love / Church of hate.

Entrance into church fluid movement.

Why is he sketching Sydney in the church? What's going on there?

Jack's rhythm – as a photographer – quick – in and out – essentially predatory. Painter's rhythms – contemplation – why does he go out if he doesn't have to go out (as an artist)? Does he go to the field as a painter or a black supporter?

It's important for the action to stand for it as it is. Not as a prescription for further action.

# 67

Break

Cross-fertilisation of racist ideas between US and UK.

Anecdotes about racists who still think of Britain as still this massive space of empire.

The psychological make-up of the figure who makes the speech.

Powell was right.

Painter has to change between painting as politics and painting as painting or marry both.

Cassie still thinks contemporary blacks are the first to think of themselves as UK black. Part of which is cultivating a sense of cultural and political largesse.

Trying to hold a tension between a culture of mediocrity and a culture of possibility / culture of expression.

'Our parents expressed themselves through their children' – no that's the moral and ethical pivot of the film.

Cassie's insistence on celebrating our parents' achievements.

While celebrating emergence you have and think about the meaning of that emergence.

The process of being cut down or being made small.

Opportunities being missed – governments and ideas being formed, that's the process, that's the palette; that circularity.

We're going back in time stylistically, but we're still staying here.

Commonwealth of feeling, fleeting moment.

This is about the options that were available at the time.

**Simmi:** where did that come from?

A fraternity of doers. **Simmi.**

Why is the news delivered like **that**? By faith.

**Naomi:** family before politics? church before politics? The silence

of this film is about the moments before and after speech.

**Ian:** There's a difference between how you enter the time in the 60s to how you do it in the 70s.

What will I be seeing when I see this film? People doing things. The silence won't be noticeable.

They agree it's more worthwhile to talk about character interaction than going through each scene.

And that characters introduce themselves to each other.

**Ian** would like a chalk board to work out the relations of one character to another.

**Faith:** negrophile; **Louie's** her link to black culture. He doesn't take her that seriously. Is he a painter masquerading as a political activist? He's wary of her, because she's a journalist (this is about cross-burning scene).

He doesn't seem serious about (1) the cross burning – he's more interested in fronting on **Faith**; (2) News on TV of Malcolm's death – he's more interested in **Faith**.

**Cassie's** trying to work out the coffin-kissing scene. John offered a solution, a cruel action with a kind motion. Cassie doesn't find Millie's action of getting Naomi to kiss Louie's coffin justifiable.

Louie and Naomi – bad for each other? Their relationship starts and ends with blood.

# 76 1965

Simmi: works for spivs, Jack has her own house, Millie rents a room from Simmi.

Jack: is he responsible to his profession, himself, his friends?

Jack has dilemma – what does he do when he sees the eviction. He's genuinely into the black cause, but his whisky swigging – is it like Louie's cynical laugh, is it Dutch courage? Is Jack an art photographer or a journo-photographer? He lives behind his camera. There's something painful about it for him. What is he going to do



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232. Swifty, rejected poster for *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

233. Mo Sesay as Simi, Kwabena Manso as Louis,  
*Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

234. Mo Sesay as Simi, Kwabena Manso as Louis,  
*Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

235. Naomi's beads, scriptures, candle, *Who Needs  
A Heart*, 1991

236. Caroline Burghard as Faith, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991



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with the photographs – he’s going to put them in his ‘unpublished’ file. One day in the future he will publish it.

He will take a picture because he doesn’t want to lose that moment.

**He’s old money, he’s from that strand of white society, successful, who aligns himself with the black cause among other causes.**

**He’s made a break with his past, he’s given money to causes.**

**Assuage his guilt.**

Bring the question of his money up in the TV interview.

What drives him – integrity or commitment, or journalistic opportunism? He is a man who takes photographs – he’s documenting the movement. In ’65 he’s doing this for England – that’s where his head would be at.

Simmi lets Jack in because he’s impressed by him and his money and his knowledge of the movement and drugs.

Regarding Jack’s mixed race child: the wife left him.

**1965**

Simmi – the reality of his world is cold cash money. He doesn’t ask where his employers are from – because if he asks too many questions his world will collapse.

Simmi and Louie are friends – fraternity of thieves, they need each other – an interdependency. Simmi is Louie’s link to the street. Simmi is shrewd but misinterprets things: dangerous. He is the movement’s calling card. He can hold his own: and is thus valuable.

Millie’s eviction.

**#79**

Simmi takes money from Naomi. She might not like him for that but he could also give her and Sydney work.

**#80**

Party – the fun part of Faith and Louie’s relationship.

**#81**

Abigail’s appearance as Jack’s sister; Ian has his doubts about her. She seems a bit of a red herring. Maybe they’d be better set as ex-lovers, a perfect class match. Too difficult to establish without speech. General: compared to everyone else, Naomi and Sydney are very straight people – when they play music together,



Naomi – suffocating mother figure, either overbearing or helpful.

The Manor House: the big party/wake (1966-68). Why does Jack take pictures of pregnant women before going to the funeral? It's just part of what he does (Cindy and mum in funeral year, hang picture taken by Jack, this is suggested by Ian).

Why does Sydney get so wrecked? He hasn't done any drugs.

#24

Saturday: for the first time the characters have choices – Syd.

Sydney isn't sure music is the most important thing. Naomi confirms this for him.

Re: Naomi – everyone thought Sydney, not Naomi, was the pastor. Trevor (Sydney) didn't realise he and Naomi were married.

Everyone thinks Sydney and Naomi are going to make it. They're the centre of attraction – because of their music. (They seem the most stable couple; in the '60s anyway). Slowly Sydney ends up a bar-room pianist is beyond me (John).

Sydney hands the keys to Naomi as a mark of atonement. Sydney's the only one who Millie is going to flip, so he's the one who takes her out. It is then he decides to use the music to other ends and the kids become the means by which perfectibility could be reached. This is when he and Naomi start doing their own thing. They're together physically, but there's a chasm between them. They love each other – but not entirely.

Have you ever asked your parents if they love each other?

They absent themselves from each other. The quality of experiencing that drift away from each other is a good thing to try and register that loss. That feeling of someone turning and walking away is palpable.

Abigail has a feeling of contempt for Dominic having deserted her. She wants him but wants revenge too. She doesn't hide this, that shift from feeling you have to hide this in '65 to the feeling of not having to hide it in '70 is a sort of shift to feminism.

It's important that the characters aren't repressed, that they act on the repressions they know about so the repressions they don't know about can come through. Re: Faith to Louie after making love and Faith loses her virginity, and Naomi makes Faith kiss Louie's coffin. When Faith attacks the white woman at the funeral.

If the characters can do that they can visibly contract and shrink, flow and be static.

There's a scene missing between 68 and 74 where we can see where they put into motion the decisions made after 68 and the party: each character has to assert the decisions they would enact later in '72.

Best to see the film as a series of family snapshots, this is a way of having a history they can remember rather than an external history.

It's good to chill out in our characters for half an hour – Faith.

**Action Man: pull the string out the back and it talks.**

**Kids watching 'This is Your Life' while eating chips out of paper with sauce and ketchup.**

Louie and Faith's lovemaking scene. Too descriptive (let the characters make love as they would, not as you'd imagine them). It has to be worked out and be part of the characters' process of getting to know each other.

They'd like to act the periods out chronologically.

Day of concrete studies (**Archive video on sixties, can Trevor borrow it for the day?**)

John wrote the pieces while listening to the music. The pieces work around the music. (**Structure: spent first week going through script**)

Street scenes – scenes up to Manor House start on page 23 (**Day of concrete studies – week**)

Sixties – written in Messiaen sacred and secular music (for pages 23–25).

Sydney plays Messiaen (**evenings continue going over character elements – informal meetings**)

Actors exercises for #23. Millie doing Dominic's portrait. They've worked hard to get to be with each other. Millie (Cassie feels very self-conscious but is prepared to try) is relaxed, she's gotten here.

The actor has to choose external and internal characteristics.

It is helpful if the director tells the actors how he's going to shoot.

Structure of room is off-putting.

The space has to be right.

Ian: tell me how you are going to shoot it.

Naomi: because characters are interlinked it's a very good way to get to know each other but it is hard to rehearse like this without props or dialogue. Maybe improvising would be better in group or one-to-one situations. Too intimate/voyeuristic.

Cassie: set up private and public spaces, discover and work through the internal and external parts of character in those spaces.

Ian: more direction.

Naomi: need to build up relationships with actors what they do between scenes.

Trevor: do some improvisation 'prior' and 'after' scenes for the scenes in the script. Do it to the music (what do the characters do before and after the scenes?)

Kwabena: he'd like to do that, but without hearing the music.

Cassie: give yourself the opportunity to work with the music.

Options

1 Direct them

2 Go through it per character

3 Do textual work

Go through situations and build up a vocabulary between characters.

Couple groups – very productive.

Mon–Wed: small groups of characters in individual scenes.

Go through the traffic of the actors just seeing each other.

Building relationships.

It's pointless doing the scenes with stand-in actors.

They spend the rest of the morning: women working together/ the men working out character relations.

The men work their relationships out chronologically (flashback).

The bit that isn't in the script.

In 69–71: this is when they change a hell of a lot.

'65 period of innocence/idealism (as it goes on you are forced to become realistic) they're in their mid-20s; Simmi 23; Jack 25; Kwabena 25. They begin with a generosity of spirit; openness and camaraderie.

Sydney and Naomi come off the boat straight into music college. They've never had to decide what they want. Going to England with them down or what. They don't know anything about themselves yet. Sydney starts playing Messiaen radically religious. All the characters are radical and it's this quality that connects them. Kindred spirits. There's something attractive about how they interact that draws Simmi to them – he's street.

It may be the fact that Jack has a black baby that draws Louie, Sydney to Jack. Simmi and Jack knew each other through draw. Simmi is introduced to Louie and Sydney through Jack.

Louie and Jack – both from well-off families that link them.

Being from the Caribbean they need a guide to England. Hence Jack. Things revolve around Jack, he's the centre of knowledge and activity.

There's a reciprocity.

Jack's wife leaves in 64. He was too weird. The whites move out when the blacks move in. Jack stays so when Louie and Sydney move in, Jack's there (Colin MacInnes figure).





**In Nigeria a gay Irish chief.**

60s life becomes a revelation to Sydney. The pump house party is a movement of experimentation and cultural possibility.

In 65 Jack is leading things. By 66 things change (park scene).

66: Party and Funeral.

Millie's collapse marks the start of the rift and the end of the 60s between the men. We see them after that split. They all feel a sense of shame. It pushes them back into real life; Louie goes back to his art and family; Simmi maybe goes away – how easy it is for him to change – he relocates. Jack is now estranged from his aristocratic past and his friends. Small-time photographer. Sydney goes back to Naomi, he knows the only way to use his new music is to teach. Louie goes to jail. **(Can't play gospel again).**

The vibe on the street changes between them.

Jack and Simmi's relationship changes. Jack is now dissipated, Simmi is now into 65.

The sisterhood between the women starts in 71.

Millie acts as the catalyst for their changing.

Kwabena/Trevor doesn't understand the Millie character – her role. If there was a fraternity of artists, Millie would surely be a part of it. Her presence only makes sense when she's dead. The women understand her. They have a more intimate relationship with her. **(Millie dies)**

Afternoon session on the women.

They'd spend the latter part of the morning going through character relations.

When Abigail sees Millie and Dominic together she feels like she's not being included in the 'new world' they represent.

(NB: Abigail and Simmi get it on after the 1st party?)

What do Naomi and Sydney get up to in the two-year period?

Jealousy isn't enough.

Jealousy keeps it simple.

Millie/Cassie – Millie thinks she can win at this game, she decides this.

Innocent because she thinks anything is possible. She believes in this as a good thing. She does have an awareness of the limits of the possibilities open to a black woman in 65: Dominic represents a possible opening. She loves Dominic. When we first meet her, her work is still open to her. Thinks about herself primarily as an artist.

The world they inhabit. They ignore the potentially disruptive effects of the outside world on their lives. They're creating a world for themselves.

Millie believes in the relationship. She knows 'race' and 'gender' were there. Did she ignore them? They were intangibles. Her art, her relationship, her love are tangible and immediate.

There was no base for a black woman to deal with questions of 'race' and 'gender'.

What would have been important to Millie? What she and her friends were doing – individual pursuits. Painting and Dominic are the most real things.

**Faith:** What's the most real important thing for Faith? She's been left home to follow a journalistic career. Meeting Louie. Introduction of a new cultural scene. She just went for it. Didn't go to college. She's 20 in 65.

**Millie:** Cassie has a problem with Millie being an art student, feels better about her coming from a lack; being an artist in spite of herself. Prefers evening classes. She's not prepared for where she is. Thinks she's not quite up to it.

**Faith:** persuaded via friendship with Naomi?

Does she marry after child is born? Yes.

Do they get married after party? Yes, 1971. That's when Louie does the painting.

**Abigail:** debutante, not married long to Dominic, doesn't work, socialite, what is important to her?

Infatuated with Dominic. He represents a flirtation with risk. He's a David Bailey sort of figure. His movement runs out in 68, peace and love, his bravado and cunning out of place – post-68 riddled with doubt and uncertainty.

Mental hospital scene only Dominic goes to see Millie.

She moves from Dominic to Simmi because he still represents that Nietzschean figure. Self-made man.

Louie's important – but only up to a point.

She would have just turned up to her dad's with Dominic already married.

She could have come here on a draftsman traineeship (something real) learn and go back. She became distracted by the possibilities of self-expression: a possibility.

**Naomi:** into her music which is important. So is building a home, being practical. Works at the club at night. She's contented with things as they are in so far as her life is concerned, uncomplicated. Had their first child in 66. Both enjoying their discovery of music. Sydney has decided to stay in England. Maybe she wants to go back. They're already married – respect from man. She knows he is a good man. Sees her future here.

She had an obligation. She came here with music scholarship. Never goes back – feels guilt over it.

1968

Millie is nomadic.

Between 65–68 would she have been living low?

Would Dominic have played the two women off of each other?

NB: Millie – here return to roots signals the end of her breakdown.

Faith and Naomi would have discussed what to do about their men.

Would have introduced Faith into her church rituals etc.

Millie represented a different line of politics to Louie. She thought of Malcolm X as a criminal figure. Louie believed in him.

Millie had become a cult-nat after 68. What would bring her back to Faith and Naomi?

Naomi and Sydney post-68. She wants Sydney to stay with her. He does but not in the way she wants. She stays with church decides to get well into it. Black religion becomes meeting point for Naomi and Millie.

Millie's into it because it's part of her cult nationalism.

The three women meet every Friday. Cigar scenes. The three women are in control, chilling out. It's not a healing/therapeutic number. It wouldn't be cruel that they're doing this while Louie's breaking his Michael X pictures; they broke with that scene in '68.

Or maybe they're being cruel: the man in whose name so much damage was done to them has died and Louie torn up over it. They wouldn't be overly concerned – the women have passed that moment.

Is there a connection with the women's ritual and Louie's actions? Millie and Naomi ask her to go see what he's doing, she can't do anything, she wants to carry on because if she does go to him she will have returned in a particular sort of way, which she doesn't want to do.

The bead throwing is consultation.

Millie is still not comfortable in cult-nat, still unsettled, needs a gesture to externalise this unsettled condition. Louie's action would trigger off her uncertainty 72–5 her cult-nat phase.

Naomi goes to religion, leaves the kids to Sydney, he raises them, gives everything to religion. She and Sydney no longer even sleep in the same room.

68–72

237. Mo Sesay as Simi, Ruth Gemmell as Abigail,  
*Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

238. Jay Villiers as Dominic, Ruth Gemmell as Abigail,  
*Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

239. Cassie McFarlane as Millie, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991



## Tuesday

Cassie would like to go through the chronology of her character.

Caroline: would like to go through place with Louie and do her own research into the journalist part of her job.

Naomi: one-to-one studies, maybe a group piece at end of week.

Caroline off for day researching.

Naomi and Sydney afternoon.

Millie, Abigail, Dominic – morning.

Simmi – some point in the day.

Thursday morning; Cassie and Jay will meet on location, then maybe again on Sunday.

How would Jack and Dominic have met? He was doing Dominic's photosession for an album. Jack doesn't like Dominic. He's happy – revenge – about Simmi and Abigail. Simmi goes for Abigail – a way of getting closer to Jack. Jack would get Simmi to look after Abigail – stop her from getting drunk, while Dominic is dancing with Millie.

Jack can still treat Abigail as MacInnes would've treated a white interloper in the Grove; he'd try and get her out both because he's worried for her and because he wants the Grove to remain his turf.

Abigail and Simmi would've been going on since the pump house.

Dominic is at the height of his popularity, at the pump house.

Jack introduces Simmi to Abigail, gives Simmi his point of entry and grounds his bravado, when he kisses her.

NB: Jack drives Faith to Louie's funeral instead of her taking a cab. (He'd be maybe in one other shot).

Abigail's look would be more calculated.

Millie and Jack: how they met; she was at art school, went to jazz club with fellow hipsters. Dominic sees her. Jack obviously hangs out in these places.

Sc. 73. Jack invites press to club for interview instead of going to TV studio. The Michael X question still comes up. The interview takes place at a fundraising gig.

Why is Millie wearing a blk power symbol in 1975?

Is Millie with Jack and Louie on the blk power question? Yes.

NB: Ian and Cassie are adrift without that ten pages.

NB: Jack doesn't have to dissipate. His future depends on whether he does a Chris Blackwell, whether the family fortunes have not been squandered.

RE Sc 89. Ian says; it's confusing that the hearse arrives at the party because the party should be separated from the funeral?

Why are the KKK men also the hearse men?

Simmi would also have thrown her out because she's going out with a guy.

RE: painting scene. They're both posing. There has to be something sexual to it. Sensuality, eroticism, inquisitiveness – their crossing into each other's representative areas must have happened before this scene.

Start with ambiguity & expose the literal. Everything leads to their going to bed – without costumes; before this they can indulge in the ambiguity and exchange. The ambiguity is inscribed into the texture of the piece.

They have a bottle of champagne in the bedroom.

Millie goes to the party in a mask.

Simmi wears knuckle dusters, blk beret, grey suit, polo neck, Chelsea boots. Loses knuckle dusters in early seventies.

Dominic's losing Abigail. He's reliant on her financially. Unsure whether to go back to Abigail or help Millie.

Abigail gains from this.

RE: hospital. Dominic goes to see Millie because he feels guilty. It's his remorse that turns Abigail off him. He wants a future with Abigail but she's off with Simmi now. She won't divorce him though.

It'd make more sense if Millie jumped Abigail instead of Faith (but that scene's been taken out).

Abigail and Dominic – married for two/three months. They are in the manor house.

Jack having Abigail as his sister gives him a tangible history beyond the Grove. Family was plantocracy. Abigail: debutante at 18. Finishing school. Born maybe in the Caribbean (or Africa?). Sent to Europe. Jack would've been raised there.

The family would've left after '62.

Dominic would've introduced Abigail to the world of the street. Jack would've kept her out of that world. The scene in the pump house; Jack would not have expected to see Abigail there.

Some obscure '60s one-hit wonder represents Dominic's hit. Heard fleetingly.

Sc 67. Scene of ambiguity and exchange. What else could be going on?

It's about choices – playing with the idea that they can choose who they want to be (Cassie).

Two prehistories for this scene.

### DOMINIC

Flamboyance of Jagger, persona of Georgie Fame, working class BG of David Bailey. Hybrid. Sixties version of new aristocracy. A bit of rough. That's why Abigail likes him. Millie's getting patronage from Dominic. His wealth is her wealth. It's not just love. For Dominic it's image – exotica. It's a great image for him. His rationale for doing things is v. simple.

All the people who in the sixties are on the way up are bunt out by the seventies. They all seem to want something outside of themselves.

The women of the sixties live through a period when things were supposed to have changed – but they didn't feel things were changing for them. They didn't feel they could say so.

Millie believes that things are moving for her; she sees her affair with Dominic as part of the 'new thing'. They are attracted to the idea of each other.

Everything Dominic does is a pose. It's not that he's a total cunt, but he's close – and for a number of reasons; he's paying Millie's rent. (Jay).

Sc 76, 78, 79. Scenes of Millie being kicked out.

Something has to be resolved in Millie's mind when she dumps the stuff on the car; why isn't Dominic there? She has this conversation in her head; she doesn't care that he has his own rationale for not being with her. She just wants him. Millie ruins the painting in a fit of pique – unresolved, determines to go for him. She's more resolved – playing to win.

He hasn't changed.

Trying to keep a friendship  
with a man whose bible was a  
book called Revolutionary  
Suicide was not easy I can  
tell you

Whisper whisper that's all  
you'll hear.

He'd invite you round and  
you'd spend an afternoon  
listening to a lecture from  
behind a closed door.

He'd come out you'd say  
what's wrong, he'd would  
say Don't bother no man  
Huey Newton had been shot  
by the L.A. cops. and the end  
of conversation.

Dominic introduces Millie to Abigail.

Simmi provides Abigail with her release. She's quite taken by being kissed by a black man. Part of this jealousy is that Millie is black.

Millie works as a waitress in a jazz club?

Why does Millie spit at Simmi when he turfs her out? Unconsciously she thinks he shouldn't do it but doesn't know why she thinks this. She knows there are other ways of doing this.

Trevor's research; listening to Bill Evans, watching '60s videos, reading Miles Davis autobiography.

The lovemaking scene; they try and 'sync up', but it's too late.

Get the kids in for Saturday; don't forget to remind John.

#### MOE/SIMMI

So Simmi is young and naïve. Millie's nervous breakdown is the turning point in his life. He leaves everything behind. Comes back in '75, independent of spiv bosses.

He doesn't need to make a jump in his character for his changes to be apparent. His attachment to jazz is emotional. He's still got his bravado. He doesn't feel sorry for himself. He agreed to join Jack's world on the basis of friendship.

Abigail would be attracted to Simmi because he still has his bravado, no self-pity.

Simmi need never touch a book in order to appear redeemed.

Abigail & Simmi's relationship; they always meet in front of Dominic. It's her way of humiliating him. They do the do then part.

She brings Simmi books.

Sc 43; The kiss; sensual, passionate.

Simmi's relationship with Jack post '68 remains the same. The scales of the relationship are changing. They meet now and then but they don't talk about the street. Have a smoke, play a few records.

Simmi is an emotionally mature person now.

NB: What De Niro has four hours to say in *Once Upon a Time in America*, Simmi has to say in an hour.



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Abigail: she wouldn't leave Dominic for Simmi but she does have an attraction to him. He has something that Dominic has lost.

Character relations: Millie – Dominic – Abigail – Simmi. How do people pull in and out of each other's orbit?

## TUESDAY

Morning: Naomi and Sydney

They appear in scene 68 (church), 79 (home), 80 (nightclub entrance), 82 (Sydney at piano), 84 (1965 bar), 85 (Naomi pregnant in painter's studio), 90 (Sydney in tuxedo at Manor house), 91 (Sydney in tuxedo being initiated into manor house circle), 93 (tux remains while he plays the piano; this is the beginning of Sydney's costume changes).

93 is also the start of Sydney's shift from sacred music to secular music, experimental music.

If there were other musicians about it could make Sydney's transformation more graphic; it could also reflect his joining a new community – he'd feel a contradictory tug. He's found his voice in an immoral place.

Sydney made sense to Trevor when John played him a piece of music by Bill Evans.

He's innocent of the BG of immorality. It hits him that he's in all this filth, so he would go home.

Sc. 94 (Manor house lawn. Sydney lashes out. Takes Millie into the ambulance).

Sydney plays 'As Time Goes By', 'My Foolish Heart'. Only Simmi would listen, but Sydney can't take him on board because of what he's done to Millie, and he probably doesn't notice Simmi, nor does he realise his complicity in the event.

Between 91–4 we move from 1966 to '68.

Sc. 95. Sydney goes back to Naomi. He's wiped out. There's no reason for her to take him back after two years. She's incredibly strong, she takes him back, but it's her game now. She knows he's kidding himself when he tells her to look after his keys.

NB: She wouldn't put the keys in her knickers. Maybe she leaves them somewhere – goes off to her bible. She's overwhelmed by his desperation. She vocalises her difference from him (quoting from the bible?) but it makes no difference.

The pain of taking the key back is that it's too late. They try and reconnect in bed and fail.

240. Notes for script, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

241. Cassie McFarlane as Millie, Jay Villiers as Dominic, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991

242. Kwabena Manso as Louis, *Who Needs A Heart*, 1991



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Sc. (Pastor's corridor/in. bedroom) scene will be resolved on Sunday.

1965. Louie and Faith; additional information for their scenes.

Awkwardness: when Faith comes to interview Louie in his house.

They dance to the record and feel awkward.

(Kwabena) felt awkward backed out of the flat.

### FAITH/LOUIE

Things which are now meaningful:

**A.** Paintings in the studio are because (1) they worked on them together. They do action painting/writing together. (2) Sentimental value. Because they started and watched them when they were painting the house. (3) Discovered their character with them.

**B.** Louie painting overall because they wrote each other's names on it. They have known happiness together. (1) Faith's articles were written in that room. Tapes played together in the room were Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Richard, Studio One. (2) Naomi and Sydney come over to the house.

### FAITH/LOUIE; THE DRIFT

Louie is losing Faith to Naomi.

Naomi stands in Louie's light when he is painting. Naomi sees evil and confusion in Louie's paintings.

Naomi is taking away Faith – the human torch, Louie's flame.

1965. Sc 72. Bedroom Sc. should have love and rage. Start angry but end on a laugh.

1965 Sc 80. The fight in the bedroom should lead to laughter and merriment and them helping each other with costumes and make up.

### MILLIE

Swimming pool – she's alone; she's still suffering but the other woman (Naomi) thinks she is being cured.

After mental institution she will not have much to do with macho figures i.e. men in black politics.

– She would be a separatist figure.

## ON THE BORDERLINE

JOHN AKOMFRAH

### *Imagine this scenario: -*

In the future there will be a Black photographic exhibition on the theme of displacement. It will be about a particular body burdened by an excess of signs; a body literally framed as a figure of torment and bliss, of dangerous knowing and celebrations.



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The exhibition in question would be a body of photographic work in which a notoriously public figure – the Black body – will feature in a series of elaborate *mises-en-scène* from what would appear to be home movies, enigmatic dramas constructed tableaux-like which dispelled with finitude by heaping all manner of doubt on the propriety and legality of the said body to speak durable and universal truths about its alleged ‘condition’. A vernacular would be intact but it would be ‘formidably strange’. They would be bodies in a frame brought into being by a series of bastard allegories, bodies which simultaneously call upon and fiercely rebuke notions of location, ethnicity and identity as *a priori* certainties, which ‘outside’ regimes of truth – progressive or otherwise – could prescriptively rally to a ‘cause’ without having first agreed to participate in formulating the ‘untidy’ rules of the game.

Like a fuzzed video image on pause these would be impossible frames; they would try to freeze in an instant what they have been and what they could be. Bastard allegories, yes. Liberal sensibility, no way! Critical dystopias maybe, but that is only because these works would distrust too many things in the present to give the future a blank cheque – Benjamin’s ‘Angelus’, Derrida’s ‘Always Already’. They would be emblematic and enigmatic. They would flirt with the transcendental as a yearning without the voodoo or the magic. In any case they would know that the voodoo or the magic were strictly speaking unnecessary because they would have already localised enigma and codified it as an affliction deeply rooted in that body in the frame.

At this point our future exhibition will meet its first accusation of heresy. What people would want to know is whether what it contains are merely ‘outside thoughts’ and, if they are, whether these thoughts could be contained in the photographic frame. The problem is that few of these photographs will be framed.

Displacement would so strategically occupy the nodes between the public and the private by needling one with the hubris of the other with such a relish that the ensuing riot would necessarily call into question this most supreme of rationalist demarcations. Because displacement will not be the first expedition to this border country, the more mature among us could quite easily choose to ‘ghettoise’ its new gestures as a ‘return’, a repetition. This would be a mistake. Why? Because every theorist worth their salt knows that every new charting or re-mapping of this borderline necessarily produces new configurations of power and desire. It is a border which always beckons with promise; promise is the temptation, the seducer.

The exhibition will feature a number of photographers. One of these would be Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

Imagine another scenario – the intercultural magazine *Artrage* declines to publish more than one photograph by Rotimi Fani-Kayode. With no irony intended it justifies this decision by saying that ‘To have published more of Rotimi’s work would have needlessly offended many more people than it would appeal to: It would be to set the cat amongst the pigeons but ultimately to very little avail.’

Foucault once made the point that at their most fervent moments transgressions were like flashes of lightning. We recognise them for what they are when we instantly register what they are not – darkness. In that instance of their birth darkness guarantees these electrical charges their shape and clarity. But conversely lightning also forces the night to see itself for the first time. How else do we understand the process by which a black photographer becomes too untidy, too unsuitable for a black arts magazine? It is a process that’s almost too quick to register as an event, but register we must because we need to understand the ‘other ways’ through which a ‘Black frame’ becomes the site of abjection; the scene of horror. If the curatorial tastes which organise selection of works for a magazine stipulate that photographs should not ‘set the cat amongst the pigeons to little avail’ it is then not too difficult to see how works which valorise ambivalence as a key code for ‘knowing’ would be deemed ‘inappropriate’ by such tastes. So it is important to say now that displacement will not happen without ambivalence in place.

While we are on the subject of appropriateness, let us be clear about something else: the future displacement exhibition will call attention to its ethics of gesture because it sees the black body as a vessel for contest. But this truism will be a detail in its case because the works will be organised by a series of bio-economics which shamelessly flaunt their lack of divinity by pointing out something else that we’ve all suspected: this body has limits and ends. And every time they tell you this they are in effect also saying that somebody else is lying.

‘Let us pervert good sense’, Deleuze once said, ‘and allow thought to play outside of the ordered table of resemblances.’ If you listen very carefully you will probably hear the poet Essex Hemphill say the same thing in Sankofa’s *Looking for Langston*. If you are even more attentive you will hear both of them say that playing outside is a tricky thing. You can always be accused of showing off. So let’s get another thing straight. When these toiling, ‘protean’ bodies insist on speaking in the name of themselves it is not out of a sense of vanity. Narcissism is ‘always already’ in them so showing off is no big deal.

This desire to mix what Wilson Harris calls ‘Blind joy and sadness and the sense of being lost with the nearness of being found’ is an attempt to say something else.

These floating, prodigal sensibilities with their subversive flamboyance, their riotous play with boundaries are saying in effect that when we discover things have limits and ends we are not consigned to a miserable and permanent sojourn in the wilderness. They know there are people around who fear these ends but for them that’s where the fun begins. They are committed to a saying made a very long time ago somewhere in Egypt – ‘Philosophy either came to us in disguise or was given to us by a thief’. It is these sentiments which would probably cause distress.

Elaine Scarry has made the point that the rarity with which pain is represented should make us pause for thought especially when we realise how agile art has become in framing and thereby conferring visibility to other forms of distress; these distresses now have a referential content, they are now susceptible to objectification; in flight, as it were, from a real of inexpressibility. Think of Ornette Coleman, Alice Walker or Burning Spear and you could realise how central these ‘figures’ are for black advertisers.

There are things which should not be spoken of lightly and one is that displacement is about empowering. It wants to arm itself with the ability to make tangible that which elided expression in the earlier debate on black representation. And in that sense it is the ‘worlding’ of a particular form of awakening in which the body placed under duress by a willingness to construct it anew yields other potentials but in so doing also gives rise to distress. It is through this putting into flight of such a monstrous double that we will come to recognise the works in displacement. Welcome to the exhibition.

# (GHOST THE SIGNAL)

EDWARD GEORGE



**Signal 1. January 15th, 2057.** Somewhere in the mountains of the moon. He had been able to keep the story of his grandfather's madness a secret.

That's how he managed to get himself this fairly lucrative job in a hotel in the mountains of the moon as a programmer in a small time retro drum'n' bass lounge band (ghost the signal), entertaining Japanese and American business travellers relaxing after a long day overseeing the mining of the moon's frozen lakes.

The story. March 12th, 1998. The psychiatric ward of a north London hospital. A young man presents a circular burn on his chest to the nurse. Rather a deep wound in fact. He explains to the nurse that he is a child of the moon, but that he tore himself away from it as the silence and the blinding light became unbearable and then landed on Earth.

When questioned further, he admits the story is not true. What actually happened was this: he was standing in the bathroom when suddenly he heard someone singing. He didn't like the song but couldn't say why. He said that it felt like somebody was mocking him. He wondered how that guy might have got into his bathroom and where he might be hiding now.

He sat on the edge of his bathtub and listened intently. If only he knew where the voice was coming from – then he could do something. But the longer he listened, the more confused he became, unable to locate the voice exactly – hearing it everywhere and nowhere. The words also became increasingly blurry, the more he tried to follow them.

Somehow the song rang a bell; it forced him back into a past his memory couldn't access, yet continued to have a presence inside him strong enough to cause deep feelings of shame. He would have loved to leave the bathroom, lock the door behind him, never to return to this horrifying place. He could wash himself at the sink in the kitchen! But that was absolutely ridiculous. Instead, he began to scratch off the tiles and the plaster in the bathroom. When he was done, the bathroom resembled a battlefield, but he still couldn't find where the song was coming from. When the young man was asked to describe the voice in more detail, he said: spiteful, slimy, very sneering. When asked who he thought it might be, he said 'The Devil'. (ghost the signal)

The music wore him down, and a slow creeping sense of shame, crawling through the cracks in his skin, made him feel dirty inside. He took his clothes off, turned on the shower, and let it run. Under the scalding water he realised where the song was coming from: it wasn't a person; it was the shower, the water itself.

He would have turned the tap off and smashed the shower to pieces, but the voice

was changing. It was no longer threatening; now it was soothing. The melody was pure H<sub>2</sub>O, and how wonderful it was, gently singing itself into his skin. But did it not scald him? The young man shook his head and said it reminded him of when he was a child, when he was baptised.

When questioned further, the young man admitted the story was not true. The moon had given birth to him and he got the circular burn when he tore himself away from it. Much later, he realised the voice he'd heard in the bathroom that night was his own. When he was alone he would sing to himself, and as his confidence grew he would sing for anyone who wanted to listen. Busking by day and lullabying his children to sleep in the evening, singing became the source of his joy. He passed his love of music on to his son, who passed it down to his son, who passed it down to his son, who is now sitting in an empty hotel lobby somewhere in the mountains of the moon, looking up at the stars and wondering what his grandfather would have said about it all.

**Signal 2. April 10th, 1936.** Royston, Georgia. Sunset on a highway. Two white women are standing on the roadside. Their car has broken down. They see a black man approaching. Later they tell the police that he threatened them with a knife and pushed one of them into the ditch. Before he knows it, Lint Shaw, a 'strapping 45-year-old negro and farmer', as the local newspaper describes him, winds up in the prison of Danielsville, Georgia, waiting trial for the charge of attempted injury. When a hundred outraged white men attempt to raid the prison in order to implement their own idea of justice, Shaw is briefly relocated to another prison in Atlanta. Later, he is returned to Danielsville.

During the night of Shaw's trial, forty white men storm the prison. They drag Lint from his cell (ghost the signal) down to the scene of the alleged incident. Forty guns and rifles take aim and fire. Afterwards, they lynch him from a pine tree not far from his farm. The following morning his family, afraid for their lives, refuse to identify his body.

**Signal 3. Texas, November 27th, 1936.** A roving young man walks into a recording studio, a shack with a hand-painted sign, which says 'The American Recording Corporation'. Robert Johnson doesn't know it, but he has already made history. Greil Marcus remembers that Robert Johnson was one of the first African-American musicians who were no longer born into slavery. Johnson's generation – born around the turn of the twentieth century – suddenly experienced a freedom to move that their parents – being property of Southern plantation owners – had never known. Hence, this generation's music is no longer born of or against dreadful circumstances in

particular – against racism, lynching, or the levy on the crops. According to Marcus, the blues protests against life itself.

Marcus doesn't specify whose life he's talking about, but it is probably enough to point out that the men and women from Johnson's generation who sang the blues were the 'first Afro-Americans who were able to leave their hometown, their families and church ties, but above all their workplaces and plantations behind them of their own free will. And maybe at the same time get away from those looming desires to form close bonds with somebody that would only have constrained their soul and their urge to be free – not to speak of the horror of coming into existence, the horror of those who are suddenly thrown into daylight. What a frightening freedom...'

Here now in Texas is the vagabond Robert Johnson, who gives the world of work the slip all the better to drift across the Mississippi Delta to New York and Chicago and back. He brings with him a handful of new songs, all bearing witness to the dangerous friendship with the shadowy figure, the only person capable of making Johnson's God-damning soul shiver at his wild idea of an escape, of complete freedom, from this world of unlimited reverence: the Devil himself – who also sits in the studio, keeping an eye on the old, rattling recording devices.

Johnson sits in front of the microphone, clears his throat and his head. Bony fingers pluck a skeletal phrase from his guitar, and he starts to sing. It's a song about Johnson's dealings, his friendship almost, with the Devil, and his indifference towards the fate of his immortal soul ('...I'm going to beat my woman until I get satisfied', he sings, and somewhere in a bedroom, blood on his fists, his own voice, drowning out her screams, the only screaming he hears is his own, the sound of a man falling into an abyss, of himself, of black on black violence, a black hole of sound, with nothing to cling to – not her, not the world - not even himself. Indeed, a terrible and terrifying freedom.)

...because at the time the question of knowing how you were viewed in the white world – as other than, less than, or just not human at all, the question of being other than human, was less a matter of intellectual inquiry than one of life and death. It's unlikely that Johnson, roving and rambling through the centres of segregation in the southern states of the USA, knew nothing of the lynching and murders of countless black people such as Lint Shaw. Presumably, those were precisely the stories that made him want to be as free – or better yet – freer than white people could be themselves, when he was. And in a world where whiteness provided the limit of what it meant to be fully human, it might at least be possible that the excessive, new sense of freedom





experienced by a renegade like Johnson, could finally mean being something more than human. Maybe he had (ghost the signal) the following thought – however fleetingly: ‘What could it mean, what would it take, to become superhuman...’

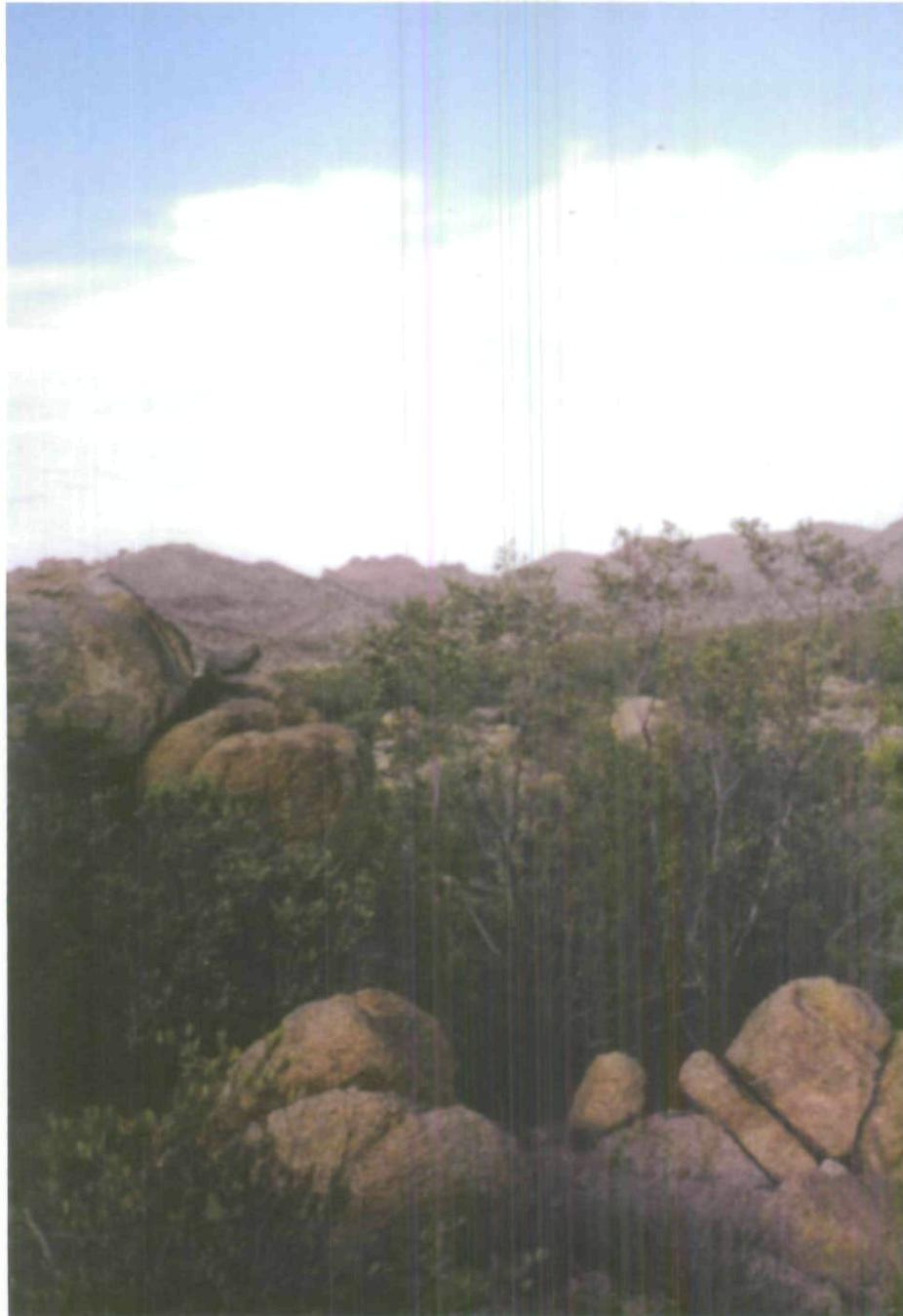
While he was dozing on the back seat of the overland bus late at night, such thoughts – well who knows – were probably not completely alien to him. He guarded his nocturnal affairs with the King of the Underworld like a treasure: ‘...to really have Judgement Day in one’s grip. (To finally have done with HER) ...What a thought...’ And maybe during his travels across the South, looking out a train window, contemplating the fields passing by, the clouds moving in front of the sun, casting shadows on a small hamlet near Royston, watching policemen cutting a corpse from a tree, he says to himself: ‘Well now, if that’s the highest achievement of humankind...’

**Signal 4.** A highway side somewhere in the Deep South, 1938. Robert Johnson’s ghost rises from beneath the ground and boards a Greyhound bus (ghost the signal). He takes his place on one of the back seats, next to an elegant, stocky man in his mid-forties, a Baptist preacher, a Reverend by the name of Martin Luther King Senior. A child, a somewhat impassive looking boy with a moon-shaped face, accompanies the Reverend. He is nine years old and his name is Martin Luther King Junior. Robert Johnson’s ghost carefully studies the boy’s face while he is looking rather absent-mindedly at the grey sky. When the clouds suddenly disappear, making room for a clear blue sky, Robert Johnson’s ghost is suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of mourning, for himself and for the boy.

**Signal 5. December 2nd, 1956.** A bus stop in Montgomery, Alabama. Robert Johnson’s ghost wakes up at the back of a bus. The quest for freedom – particularly in its futurological and post-human, ontological and technological, political and fantastical forms – all deeply rooted in black music to the present day – finds its absolute, unconditional voice, both when Robert Johnson wakes up at the end of his journey to his first appointment at the American Recording Corporation, and when his ghost wakes up, again, at the back of another bus, on December 2nd, 1956.

Johnson has been dead for eighteen years. It will be another twenty years before he will become famous. However, particularly during that long interval, Johnson may well have wanted his old evil spirit – immortalised on ‘Me And The Devil Blues’ – to ride the buses all the way across America, and all the way down through the deep South.

Now then. On the morning of December 2nd, 1956, what raises the ghost of Robert Johnson from his sleep are the massed ranks of the local press and television



news teams, noisily documenting an elegantly dressed black man, who has decided to sit at the front of the bus beside a white person. Dead Bob didn't know it, but at that moment he witnessed the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's first victory for the Civil Rights Movement.

Dreams evoking political activism in some, and sonic fictions in others, with black audiophiles spinning them further out, take place in parallel universes (even if they sometimes overlap) separated by a line as fine as the line separating the world of the living from the world of the dead...

Dr. King could not know that the ghost sitting behind him had started, years before King was born, to come up with a number of difficult questions – admittedly not always thinking, but always feeling them through to the very end – that interrogated the relationship of freedom to mobility, body to soul, in music, in the voice, in the space of the song, in the body in the world, inside and outside the song.

The quest for absolute freedom, the capacity to evoke and illuminate darkness, would influence the work of other artists from the segregated world, most of whom had not heard of Johnson or, on that day in November 1956, of Martin Luther King. But they were no less determined to shed their old identities for new ones

**Signal 6. July 12th, 1956.** Transition recording studio, Chicago, Illinois. Sun Ra, born Herman Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, the jewel in the crown of segregation, is leading his band of ten musicians through 'Sun Song', the last track on his first eponymous LP.

Many years later, his passport will identify him as 'Sun Ra', born on Saturn, a place even more hostile than the Birmingham experienced by Ra's generation, those born in the years of the First World War.

By the mid-nineteen-fifties, Ra had already made a name for himself in jazz circles, but was considered a little eccentric, if one was being polite. In a world where black people were not allowed to sit at the front of a public bus and had no right to vote, the idea that they would one day even live on other planets must have seemed more than eccentric...

Looking back, though, Ra's project seems to be the poetic anticipation of a transformation, where the lost highways haunted by Johnson's restless old evil spirits and the endless streets walked by Martin Luther King have mutated into a kind of flight path for astral journeys into the 21st century.



While the Civil Rights Movement was beginning its profoundly terrestrial struggle for the symbolic goal of the freedom to sit where ever one pleased on a bus, Ra was developing his no less political, cosmological goal, the freedom to roam the universe. 'Space is my planet... It's my home.'

To finally have done with this God. To finally abandon the search for a place in this world. To become something other than human, here and now, while also hailing from some far away land, from ancient Egypt, Africa before the slave trade, and from somewhere out there too, from deep in the harsh winds of Saturn, stopping over here and then continuing the flight. The moment of black radicalism's shift into a new phase of civil protest, as if walking was going to change the world, is foreshadowed, prefaced, by Sun Ra's cosmologically themed poetic vision of the future.

It was a remarkably productive cosmology, resonating deeply in African American culture and beyond, during and after Ra's life. The futurological trends in black music after Sun Ra invariably and repeatedly threaten to undermine the unity of the eternal terrestrial hell that is black pop. 'Sun Song' sounds neither particularly alien nor futurological but it is Sun Ra's first attempt to illuminate a flaw in black music by the light of the interstellar background of a technologically sophisticated, impossibly extra-terrestrial future.

Thereby he reinvents himself, as a legend, a myth, a mystery – homosexual and a self-confessed secessionist from black and white America in his private life – a declaration of difference, an insistence on refusing to accept this world as his home.

With 'Sun Song', Sun Ra leads black music to the gates of an audiophilic futurology that will voice the necessity and the impossibility of that freedom already suggested in Johnson's few nightmarish, fantastic, startled blues songs. A totalising heterosexual cosmos with homoerotic echoes, sometimes enabling new (sonic) fictions of the self and sometimes functioning as a connective tissue cosmos and community.

New bodies, new machines. Hence, George Clinton's Mothership, the Funk-entechnophilic permutations, the numerous personae, or Lee Perry's studiocentric transformation of the metaphor of the Biblical Ark of the Covenant to the Black Ark, a pun, a cosmo-theophonic echo and inflation of the gold-plated case with the two tablets stating God's Ten Commandments, and the name of Perry's recording studio, and with Black Art, the name of one of his record labels. Hence, the incessant conjurations of an impossible sound environment – meteorological changes, atmospheric shifts, the rendering of signal as trace; hence, the innumerable voices and layering

and thickening and dissolution of spaces rendered as traces of their former selves. Recording makes ghosts of us all, and doubly so in the dub. Later on, Ultramagnetic MCs/Kool Keith, and then....

**Signal 7. Washington Gardens, Jamaica, 1976.** Maybe Lee Perry really did see the Devil. He is sitting on the patio of the Black Ark, ruminating with singer-songwriter Max Romeo about the most effective way of dispensing with Old Nick. Max and Lee agree on the magical-cybernetic iron shirt. Those who wear it have to chase Satan away into the remoteness of outer space 'to find another race' – and this is how they put it in their epic 'Chase the Devil': 'Lucifer son of the morning. I'm gonna chase you out of Earth.'

In his low-budget studio, Perry produces a unique music developed around a kind of heresy, a rewriting, a relocation, a blurring of the word of God into the apocalyptic mysticism and political demands of the Jamaican under-classes, that He may speak through their voices, make Himself present through their songs. The devices of songwriting and record production as low-tech media necromancy. The Ark is also a time machine, shifting the sound of black misery and suffering to a time before slavery, to the days of Noah where: 'everything was safe in the Ark'; a machinery of divine redemption; 'down in the dungeon, that's where I used to break my bread...' a sonic mythic-time machine, controls set for the days before the days of Moses.

Thus, Perry also creates a series of sound environments that do not refer to any place outside of the Ark (or is there a place in this world that sounds like the spaces he creates? Imagine: down in the slave castle dungeon, first location of becoming chattel/ becoming in-human.) Perhaps it's a world Perry carries around inside himself, the world in the flesh, the body as the space of a theo-technological evocation of the cosmos at the beginning of time, as it was created by the Creator of all creation an eternity ago, an aesthetic response, a memory machine, a technology for coming to terms with the vicissitudes of history, using a journey which dissolves historical time into the time of myth.

... In the end, Perry set fire to his studio and seemed to have suffered a nervous breakdown. Difficult to say which preceded which. The last song he recorded in the Ark was 'City Too Hot'. Mixo-meteorological overload (ghost the signal).

He has long since recovered, replacing the studio with his voice, a logorrhetic, polylogue, multiplying, dispersed across time, a resounding of the self – 'Little Moses Lee Scratch Perry, the Millionaire Liquidator' – through which Time and transformation of the body announce themselves. A science fictionalising of space and body: 'I am the



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245. The Human American Eagle, Camp Gordon, Atlanta, Georgia, 1918

246–47. The Mojave desert, Southern California, *The Last Angel of History*, 1995

248. John Akomfrah holding a record sleeve of *Nothing Is, Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space* during location shoot, Mojave Desert, Southern California, *The Last Angel of History*, 1995

249. *Memory Room 451*, 1997

250. CD cover, *Dr Octagon*, 1995

251. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

robot-computer/My name is Genesis/I am a machine/A living dream/of the past/AD-BC/before Christ...' Becoming more than human...

**Signal 8. AD 3000.** The laboratories of Dr. Octagon. Octagon knows seven different ways of travelling through time. Although most people decide in favour of slow but reliable ultra-wave time convector, the good doctor prefers the warp speed method.

Octagon keeps a record on every trip. At the moment, he is somewhere in the early twentieth century, in the study of W.E.B. Dubois. Dubois has fallen asleep at his desk. Octagon reads the manuscript Dubois is working on: 'The negro is the Seventh Son, already born with a black veil and with a kind of second-hand view of this American world – a world that does not really provide him with self-awareness, but only makes perception possible by revealing a different world. It is weird to have a double consciousness, the feeling of only perceiving oneself through the eyes of others.' Dubois is peacefully snoring (ghost the signal). Octagon reads the lines again, and wonders why he landed exactly where he did.

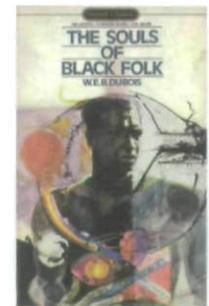
... the signal) Dr. Octagon knows that his name gives rise to the supposition that he is a multi-schizoid personality. Octagonal states of consciousness over Dubois's radically bipolar equation. That's not a problem. His genealogy gives rise to suspicions of far greater monstrosities, far removed from humankind. Enter Octagon's 208-year-old uncle Mr. Gerbik, aka Sharkman.

**Signal 9. Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles, sometime in the future.** Sharkman is regarded as a highly-strung type of, er, guy, notorious for dismembering owners of small shops, then sparing the journalists who arrive later. Possessed of magic abilities, Sharkman is able to vanish into thin air and breathes easily under water. And while our century – as Dubois commented – is still marked by the differences of a fairly limited range of skin colours, in the third millennium, the colour of skin presents a capacity that mainly serves to escape from the cops. Bloodthirsty Sharkman turns transparent; he is made of refracted light, glistening in all colours of the rainbow. He has the skin of an alligator, sometimes shimmering purple, sometimes orange and sometimes green, seven hydraulic eyes without pupils, grey hair and delicate bright-yellow sideburns.

Part shark-alligator, part human being. Far removed from humankind. A loyal flock of alligators follows him as he roams the streets of Los Angeles, human blood on his soles. Gerbik's nephew, Dr. Octagon, is the 'God of the rebel army (...) with the special task to return from the future every time'. Maybe it runs in the family – just imagine uncle Sharkman wading through the murky waters of the past, through the marshland



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of the Deep South into Royston in 1936. The murderous racists are tearing down the prison walls of Danielsville and Lint Shaw knows that his final hour has come. Suddenly, looming up from the shadows, the ghastly figure of Sharkman, monster of revenge. What terror the mere sight of him brings to the lynch mob, what horrific pain he inflicts as he severs limbs from joints, tough grey skin glistening dark with blood. And what sounds the lynch mob make as Sharkman's loyal army of alligators tear the guts from their stomachs. Those screams.... (ghost....)

**Signal 10. The summer of 1996**, an apartment in downtown Los Angeles. Kool Keith Thornton tells the press that he runs an escort agency offering personal services. He talks a lot about porn and porn stars. Rumour has it he's been away for a bit, resting at the Bellevue Mental Hospital. Speculation, pure speculation. While most rappers still aim for as much hard and dirty social realism as they can squeeze into a rhyme, Keith opted for the science-fiction alternative as early as 1986. Already on his first album that he produced with the Bronx-based rap group, Ultramagnetic MCs, Kool Keith was extolling the virtues of travelling at the speed of thought.

Dr. Octagon, one of his many alter egos, had already been introduced on the Ultramagnetic cut *Smoking Dust*. As with Ra, Perry or Clinton, the doctor presents a limit and a new start for black sonic fiction – a sexually obsessed time traveller on the quest for freedom of mobility and for his own sense of self, a search for a way past the limitations of belonging to an alien world, which started with Robert Johnson's walk with the Devil.

Thornton's Octagon figure appears at a strange moment in the history of hip-hop. Gangsta rap had reached its zenith and the music's writerly concerns had been reduced to feuds between New Yorkers and Los Angeles-based rappers, which culminated in two brutal, lethal acts of black on black violence. Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace, aka Biggie Smalls, aka The Notorious B.I.G., were both murdered around the time Octagon appeared on the scene. You'd think a double murder would be enough to mark the beginning of the end of Gangsta rap as a lucrative cash cow for the music industry...

Thornton, Wallace and Shakur were all born around the late sixties and early nineteen-seventies. They are the children of the generation that grew up during the Civil Rights era and from which came the Black Panther Party, the radical, armed, political group formed in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968.

**Signal 11. April 3rd, 1968 (ghost the signal)**. Night in a hotel room, Memphis, Tennessee. Doctor Martin Luther King Junior is tired. He closes his eyes and falls into a deep

sleep, where he dreams his last dream...

After King's assassination, there were a lot of discussions about his dream of a post-racist America, and the end of that dream. Even before his death, King had warned the young rebels of the dangers of picking a fight with an enemy whose military power was strong enough to wage a protracted war in Vietnam.

But King's idea of non-violent protest died the day he was murdered, subsumed by a wave of armed resistance by the Black Panthers against the police and the FBI. When the Panthers were destroyed, their children (for example Tupac, whose parents had both been Panthers) founded the hip-hop nation. For them, sleep – the state of greatest vulnerability – the path into the land of dreams, the place of hauntings – was the enemy, what rapper Nas called 'the cousin of death'.

Against this backdrop of dreams deferred, brutal loss, and unanswered rage, Thornton projected the phantasmagorical figure of Dr. Octagon into the future. Thornton/ Octagon is a stranger in this world. Trapped in the rule of melanin, one eclipses the other, withdrawing from 'Earth people', confessing with an almost boisterous sadness: 'Space is my planet, I live there, I eat there, bathe there, wash there. That's my home', and sounding as if there were times when he didn't feel at home anywhere, neither in their skins nor in the world outside.

**Signal 12.** Night time on an uncertain date in an uncertain location somewhere in the Deep South. On a path leading to a shady intersection. Octagon observes the figure of Robert Johnson shivering in the dark. The two men speak. He attempts to warn Johnson against his aim of making a friend of the Devil, pointing out to Johnson where this pact will lead him, the two men argue and go their separate ways. The Doctor turns back, but even warp speed cannot prevent him from arriving a few milliseconds too late – the deal has been sealed with a handshake. From now on, there will be a lively, troubled exchange between the Devil and black musicians: darkness sounding the insecurities of black masculinity.

**Signal 13. North London, winter, 1997 (ghost the signal)**. The following words have been carved into an old brick building: *Tabulaeium Questionis Nomag*.

He has just turned nineteen and was born in Tottenham. He has not made a record yet. Doesn't really know how that works. But he would like to make one, that's why he took the job in the supermarket a few streets down, and is now saving for the equipment. He'd rather start small, practising at his friends' places. He has already put his wildest times as a thug behind him and if asked, he says that he doesn't miss them.



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252-253. Greenwood, Mississippi,  
*Memory Room 451*, 1997

254. Greenwood, Mississippi, *Martin Luther King:  
Days of Hope*, 1997

255. Mojave desert, *The Last Angel of History*, 1995

In the past, he sometimes did things that he shouldn't have done. He doesn't even talk about that with people whose respect he rates. A bad thing, no matter how far back in the past, can take on a life of its own in the present. Talking just keeps things from dying: the less said the better. And besides – everybody knows that some of that stuff still haunts him.

It went like this. It was midnight and he and his friends had a plan. Earlier that evening they passed a house that was surrounded by high walls with a green wrought-iron gate. Looked like a fortress. The doorframe was hand-plastered and in its top left corner there was a little statue: a little cross-legged Devil, his mouth twisted to an evil grin, arms stretched out in a macabre welcoming gesture.

The boy climbed the wall, risking a glimpse beyond it. In the garden, he discovered the silhouette of a wooden cross as tall as a man. The cross was stuck in the ground the wrong way round, upside down. He and his friends had seen enough horror films and read enough sensational reports in the press to know what that meant. Satanists.

They made a plan. They would break into the house and show the Devil worshipper what was what. For a few seconds it seemed like a great idea, but then they thought about what else they might discover once inside...

They dropped the plan quickly. But it seemed to the boy that the few seconds of doubt had opened up a gap, allowing the Devil to slip through in secret, now changing the boy's fate through a kind of an almost mute murmuring voice that he couldn't figure out or shut up.

After a few weeks, the boy and his friends were just hanging around near a burnt-out car wreck in the council estate near Broadwater Farm, watching the crack dealers at work, when two other boys came running towards him. They were chased by a group of moustachioed middle-aged white guys with their knives drawn. His impulse was to run too, and that's what he did. The men chased him through the estate, up to the second floor of one of the flats, and cornered him at the end of the exterior balcony. To escape his captors the boy would have to jump ten metres to the ground. Down below was nothing but concrete, with a small patch of grass a bit further to his right. His friend jumped first and landed on the grass.

Later on he said that he had felt as if he had been swallowed by darkness while he was falling. The doctors said that he had been very lucky. He landed head first on the concrete, but somehow his hands protected him, cushioning the fall. He could have

suffered serious brain damage, or a broken backbone. He would have been paralysed for life. But all he lost was his pride and a few of his teeth.

He had to stay at home for one and a half months, his leg was put in plaster and he had wires in his mouth and throat in order to allow everything to heal. He felt absolutely rotten. He could only eat soup and mashed potatoes – and even then only using a straw, and his mother had to feed him because he couldn't move his hands.

After they'd taken off the cast, the doctors also rammed screws and metal particles into his arm, all the way from his forearms to his wrists, he says. He looked like a defeated super villain from a comic strip. Glaring, lethal laser bolts shooting from his arms at the push of a button were the only things missing.

But the sole after-effect was that his hands were no good for beating up people any longer. They were too weak now. So now he's stacking shelves in the supermarket, saving and waiting. He's more interested in music now, the stuff that's not even played by the pirate stations. He really only likes the stuff that people who claim to know about jungle definitely don't like, he says. And if he goes out, he only does it to listen to something. He records the stuff, develops new skills, because he says that one day he also wants to make music.



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## EXHIBITION HISTORY



**1986**

July 30–September 7

*From Two Worlds*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK

*Expeditions*

**1987**

March 25–April 12

*At the Edge*: Air Gallery, London, UK

*Expeditions*

June 13–July 19

*The Image Employed: The Use of Narrative in Black Art*,

Cornerhouse, Manchester, UK

*Instead of Dreaming*

December

*The Elusive Sign: British Avant-Garde Film and Video 1977–1987*,

Tate Gallery, London, UK

*Handsworth Songs*

**1988**

April–September

*The Elusive Sign*, Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria

Hochschule für Gestaltung Linz, Austria

Image Forum Festival, Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan

**1989**

February–March

*The Elusive Sign*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Holland

September 11–15

*The Elusive Sign*, European Media Art Festival, Osnabruck, Germany

November 23

Grierson Seminar and Festival, *Salute To The Documentary*,

Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada

*Handsworth Songs*

December–January

*The Elusive Sign*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, Serbia

Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, Croatia

**1990**

January 24–March 11

*The British Art Show*, McLellan Galleries, Glasgow, UK

March 30–May 20, Leeds City Art Gallery, UK

June 14–August 12, Hayward Gallery, London, UK

*Twilight City*

February 8

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

*Testament*

October

*Between Imagination & Reality: First ICA Biennial of Independent Film and Video*,

London, UK

*Twilight City*

**1991**

January

*Identity and Consciousness: (Re)Presenting the Self*, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, Canada

*Handsworth Songs, Twilight City, Testament*

November 6–17

*The Hybrid State Films*, Anthology Film Archives/ Exit Art, New York, USA

*Testament*

**1992**

April 9

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,

Smithsonian Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Washington DC, USA

*Who Needs A Heart*

November

*Arrows of Desire*, The 2nd ICA Biennial of Independent Film & Video, London, UK

*A Touch of the Tar Brush*

**1993**

April 13–19

John Akomfrah, Film-maker in Residence, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA

April 14–22

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA

*Handsworth Songs, A Touch of the Tar Brush, Who Needs A Heart, Testament*

August

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA

*Seven Songs for Malcolm X*

September 23

Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

*Handsworth Songs***1994**

September

*museum in progress, LOTprojekt, Vienna, Austria**The Migrant's Tale: A Symphony for our Time*

contributing to mobility, @art gallery, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

*Seven Songs for Malcolm X*

April 28

*Cine City: Film and Perceptions of Urban Space 1895–1995*, The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, The Getty Center, Los Angeles, USA*Twilight City***1995**

May 12–July 16

*Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*,

Institute of Contemporary Arts/ International Institute of Visual Arts, London, UK

*The Black Room*

October

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA

*Seven Songs for Malcolm X*

September–November

Nature TM

Shedhalle Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland

*Handsworth Songs, Twilight City*

December

San Francisco Museum Of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA

*Seven Songs for Malcolm X***1996**

January

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK

Pervaiz Khan, Felix de Rooy, Trevor Mathison

*The Garden Of Allah*

February 5 – April 10

*Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*,

Bonnington Gallery at Nottingham Trent School of Art and Design, UK

*The Black Room*

December 21–February 9

*Mothership Connection*, Stedelijk Bureau, Amsterdam, Holland*The Last Angel of History*

June 5–September 29

*Africa, The Art of A Continent*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA*Testament*

September–October

Steirischer Herbst, Graz, Austria

*Testament*

September

Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA

*The Last Angel of History*

September

The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles, USA

*Twilight City*

October

*Life/Live: la scène artistique au Royaume-Uni en 1986 à 1996*,  
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France  
*Handsworth Songs*

**1997**

15 December 1996 – 2 February 1997  
*The Face Lift of Europe*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland  
*The Last Angel of History*

June 21 – September 28  
*Documenta 10 Exhibition*, Kassel, Germany  
*Testament*

**1998**

February 6 – March 6  
*Colour Screens: Film and Video by African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain*,  
Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, USA  
*The Last Angel of History*

**2001**

February 15 – April 22  
*The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*,  
Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany  
*Testament*

May 18 – July 29  
*The Short Century*, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany

September 8 – December 30,  
*The Short Century*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA  
*Testament*

**2002**

February 10 – May 5  
P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York, USA  
*Testament*

November 16 – December 15

> *redirect*, Künstlerhaus, Stuttgart, Germany  
*The Last Angel of History*

June 21 – September 28  
*Documenta 11\_Platform 5*: Kassel, Germany  
*Handsworth Songs*

**2004**

April 3 – May 29  
*Britannia Works*, British Council, Athens, Greece  
*Handsworth Songs*

**2006**

February 3 – April 23  
*Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now*, Tate Liverpool, UK  
*Handsworth Songs*

June 20  
*Ghosting: The Role of The Archive within Contemporary Artists' Film and Video*,  
Arnolfini, Bristol, UK  
*Handsworth Songs*

October 6 – December 17  
*The Secret Public: The Last Days of the British Underground 1978–1988*,  
Kunstverein, München, Germany  
*Handsworth Songs*

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY



257. BAFC after winning The Grierson Award, 1987

What follows is a partial, though significant, filmography of festivals and public screenings that can be found in the Collective diaries and bookings file. It is necessarily partial because many of the Collective's screenings and festival showings did not warrant the formality of a booking; but it is also fragmentary because it only documents the bookings, screenings and festivals handled directly by the Collective. The term filmography is intended to include artistic projects carried out in 35mm slide tape and digital video as well as Super 16mm and 35mm film. It is organised in five distinct categories of production in order to form a chronological account of moving and still image work. The sequential structure of the filmography fails to disguise the simultaneous conditions of production of the majority of BAFC projects; at any one moment, several projects were underway; the categories are therefore to be understood as porous rather than absolute. Reading the filmography in conjunction with the exhibition history of the group what emerges is an account of a complex group practice that functioned collectively, autonomously and in small configurations. One might approach what follows as a biography of a singular cinicultural practice, one that registers a shift from a phase of documentation, research and alternative pedagogy into a phase focused around film production fed by continuous research that always left room for parallel projects, inside, and outside, of the membrane of the group.

*Compiled by John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, David Lawson and Sakky Bannor and edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar.*

The first category of the filmography consists of works conceptualised, researched and directed under the editorial control of the Collective.

**EXPEDITIONS ONE: SIGNS OF EMPIRE  
EXPEDITIONS TWO: IMAGES OF  
NATIONALITY (1982-84)**

35mm Kodak tape slide. Sound.  
44 minutes.

Director: Black Audio Film Collective  
Producer: Black Audio Film Collective

**Selected Screenings**

British Film Institute Summer School:  
Images of Empire, Stirling, UK,  
August 1984

London Filmmakers Co-op, London, UK,  
November 1984

London Film Festival, London, UK,  
November 1984

Watershed Arts Centre, Bristol, UK,  
March 1985

Big Broad and Massive: Black Youth Arts  
Festival, Finsbury Park, London, UK,  
March 1985

Cinema Action Workshop, Swiss Cottage,  
London, UK, April 1985

St Martins School of Art, London, UK,  
June 1985

Institute of Contemporary Art, London,  
UK, April 1985

Society for Education in Film and  
Television Conference, Bradford, UK,  
July 1985

Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, UK,  
January 1986

Camberwell School of Art, London, UK,  
January 1987

**HANDSWORTH SONGS (1986)**

16mm colour film. Sound.  
59 minutes.

*Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah  
Producer: Lina Gopaul

Screenplay: BAFC

Camera: Sebastian Shah

Camera Assistant: Edward George

Additional Photography: John Akomfrah  
Roy Cornwall

Sound: Trevor Mathison

Assistant Sound: Avril Johnson

Rostrum: Douglas Hines

Production Assistant: Claire Joseph

Production Assistant: Reece Auguiste

Additional Crew (Birmingham):

Don Shaw

Joseph Burgundy

Studio Crew (Photographs)

Camera: John Matheson

Grip: Glyn Fielding

Lighting: Dalton Campbell

Sets: Trevor Mathison

Studio Crew (British Icons)  
 Camera: Edward George  
 Trevor Mathison  
 Lighting: John Akomfrah  
 Props: Lina Gopaul  
 Voice-over: Pervaiz Khan  
 Meera Syal  
 Yvonne Weekes  
 Music: Trevor Mathison  
 Additional Music: Boys Own Battery  
 Robert Johnston  
 Supervising Editor: Brand Thumim  
 Editor: Anna Liebschner  
 Assistant Editors: Avril Johnson  
 Rosalind Haber  
 Video Editor: Hugh Williams  
 Optical: N. Gordon Smith  
 Howell Optical Printers  
 Studio Facilities: PCL Film Studio  
 Post-production Facilities: BAFC  
 Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
 Processed by: Buck Film and Video  
 Laboratories  
 Publicity: Edward George  
 Publicity Organiser: David Lawson  
 Titles: Richard Morrison (Plume Design)

#### *Interviewees*

Handsworth and Aston Welfare  
 Association  
 Asian Youth Movement (Birmingham)  
 Sachkhand Nanak Dham  
 Mr. McClean  
 Soho Rd. Sikh Temple  
 Archive Source  
 Archive Film Agency  
 Birmingham Central Library

BBC  
 British Movietone News Limited  
 Central Independent Television Limited  
 Granada Television Limited  
 Pathé Film Library  
 Yorkshire Television

#### *Additional Material*

A.Y. M. (Birmingham)  
 Ceddo Film & Video Workshop  
 Macro Film & Video

#### **Selected Screenings**

2nd Birmingham Film and Television  
 Festival, Birmingham, UK, October 1986  
 London International Film Festival,  
 London, UK, November 1986  
 Havana Film Festival, Cuba,  
 December 1986  
 Metro Cinema, London, UK,  
 January 1987  
 37th Berlin Film Festival, Germany,  
 February 1987  
 Toronto International Film Festival,  
 Canada, September 1987  
 FESPACO X Pan-African Film Festival,  
 Burkina Faso, February 1987  
 Black Film Festival, Atlanta, USA,  
 September 1987  
 Melbourne Film Festival, Australia,  
 July 1988  
 Oberhausen Film Festival, Germany,  
 April 1989

#### **Selected Awards**

The Grand Prize, Kaleidoscope  
 International Film Festival,  
 Stockholm, Sweden, October 1986  
 The Kodak Newcomers List, London,  
 UK, November 1986  
 The First Paul Robeson Prize for Cinema,  
 FESPACO Pan-African Film Festival,  
 Burkina Faso, March 1987  
 The John Grierson Award for Social  
 Documentary, British Film Institute,  
 London, UK, September 1987  
 The Social Issues Prize, Barbara Myerhoff  
 Film Festival (Anthropos) Los Angeles,  
 USA, 1987  
 The Pascoe McFarlane Memorial Award,  
 London, UK, 1987  
 The Documentary Award, National Black  
 Programming Consortium, Columbus,  
 Ohio, USA, November 1987

#### **TESTAMENT (1988)**

16mm colour film. Sound.  
 77 minutes. BAFC in association  
 with Channel Four.

#### *Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah  
 Producer: Lina Gopaul  
 Producer: Avril Johnson  
 Director of Photography: David Scott  
 Additional Photography:  
 Jonathan Collinson  
 Camera Assistant: Edward George

Sound: Trevor Mathison  
 Production Managers: Lina Gopaul  
 Avril Johnson  
 Production Assistant: David Lawson  
 Assistant Director (UK): Reece Auguiste  
 Editor: Brand Thumim  
 Assistant Editor: Saquib Asghar  
 Additional editing and sound editing:  
 Monica Henriquez  
 Casting: John Akomfrah  
 Lina Gopaul  
 Avril Johnson  
 Stills: Edward George  
 Grips (UK): Mick Duffield  
 Glyn Fielding  
 Continuity: Avril Johnson  
 Props/Costumes: Lina Gopaul  
 Avril Johnson  
 Make-up: Lina Gopaul  
 Ghana Advisor: Kwate Nee Owoo  
 Ghana Film crew supplied by:  
 Ghana Film Industry Corporation  
 Lighting Services (UK):  
 Len James Electrical  
 Rostrum: Ken Morse  
 Special Effects: Les Latimer  
 Howell Optical  
 Peerless Camera Co.  
 Post-production Facilities: BAFC  
 Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
 Dubbing Studios: Glenthams Studios  
 Negative Cutting: Frank Clarke  
 Titles: Plume Design  
 Transport (UK): Brian Coleman  
 Transport (Ghana): Yaw Baba  
 Production Accountants: Lina Gopaul

Avril Johnson  
 Louise Westaway  
 Archival Service: Archive Film Agency  
 BBC  
 Ghana Film Industry Corporation  
 National Film Archive  
 Royal College Surgeons  
 Visnews  
 Original Music: Trevor Mathison  
 Voice-over Script: John Akomfrah  
 Edward George  
 Associate Producer: Jonathan Curling

#### *Cast*

Abena: Tania Rogers  
 Rashid: Evans Hunter  
 Danso: Emma Francis Wilson  
 Mr. Parkes: Frank Parkes  
 Sergeant: Errol Shaker  
 Corporal: Alex Tetteh-Lartey  
 Women singers: Jamestown Dirge Singers  
 Boys group: Fra Fra Boys  
 Man in boat: Oko  
 Man in river: Dela Williams  
 Abena's parents: Bankie Family  
 Woman in Institute: Cleo Dorcas  
 Abena's Researcher: Fati Ansah  
 Private: John Atta

#### **Selected Screenings**

Semaine de la Critique, Cannes  
 International Film Festival, France,  
 May 1988  
 Rimini International Film Festival, Italy,  
 August 1988

FESPACO XI Pan-African Film Festival,  
 Burkina Faso, February 1989  
 San Francisco International Film Festival,  
 USA, March 1989  
 Salute to the Documentary, Montreal,  
 National Film Board of Canada,  
 June 1989  
 37th Melbourne International Film  
 Festival, Australia, June 1989  
 Festival des Films du Monde, Montreal,  
 Canada, August 1989  
 Prix Italia, Perugia, Italy, September 1989  
 Telluride International Film Festival,  
 USA, September 1989  
 Metro Cinema, London, UK,  
 September 1989  
 Uppsala Film Festival, Sweden,  
 October 1989  
 Toronto International Film Festival,  
 Canada, September 1989  
 International Film Festival of India,  
 Calcutta, India, January 1990

#### **Selected Awards**

Special Jury Award for First Drama,  
 India, 1988  
 Grand Prix, Rimini Cinema International  
 Film Festival, Italy, August 1988  
 Special mention for the use of archive  
 film and music, FESPACO XI Film

Festival, Burkina Faso, March 1989  
 Honourable Mention, San Francisco  
 International Film Festival, San Francisco,  
 USA, March 1989  
 Special Jury Prize, African Film Festival,  
 Perugia, Italy, April 1989  
 Honourable Mention, Vues D' Afrique,  
 Montreal, Canada, 1989

#### **TWILIGHT CITY (1989)**

16mm colour film. Sound.  
 52 minutes.  
 BAFC in association with Channel Four.

#### *Credits*

Director: Reece Auguiste  
 Producer: Avril Johnson  
 Lighting Cameraman: Jonathan Collinson  
 Additional Camera: Shangara Singh  
 Assistant Camera: Edward George  
 Sound: Trevor Mathison  
 Associate Producer: Lina Gopaul  
 Production Manager: Avril Johnson  
 Production Assistant: David Lawson  
 Trainee Production Assistant: Hilda Sealey  
 Location Manager: Avril Johnson  
 Editor: Brand Thumim  
 Sound Editors: Brand Thumim  
 Joe Boatman  
 Stills: Edward George  
 Rotimi Fani-Kayode  
 Grips: Carl Ross  
 Drivers: Peter Spencer  
 Wendy Simpson

Voice-over: Amanda Symonds  
 Models: Denis Carney  
 Robert Taylor  
 Researcher: Reece Auguiste  
 Post-production Facilities: BAFC  
 Studio Facilities: PCL and Star  
 Productions  
 Rostrum: Ken Morse  
 Dubbing Studio: Glenthams Studios  
 Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
 Laboratory: Buck Film Labs  
 Negative Cutter: Frank Clark  
 Titles: Plume Design  
 Film, Processing: Universal Film  
 Laboratory  
 Production Accountant: Avril Johnson  
 Stills Archive: Guildhall Library  
 Foster Associates  
 London Docklands Development  
 Corporation  
 The Royal Academy of Arts  
 Archive Sources  
 BBC Enterprises  
 British Movietone  
 British Gas  
 Educational and TV Films  
 National Film Archive  
 AR Television PLC  
 GPO Film and Video Unit  
 Thames Television  
 Imperial War Museum  
 Index Stock Shots  
 Original Music: Trevor Mathison  
 Voice-over script: Edward George  
 John Akomfrah

*Interviewees*

Paul Gilroy  
 Gail Lewis  
 George Shire  
 Homi Bhabha  
 Rosina Visram  
 David Yallop  
 Andy Coupland  
 Savriti Hensman  
 Femi Otitoju

**Selected Screenings**

Mannheim Film Festival, Germany,  
 October 1989

Melbourne Film Festival, Australia,  
 October 1989

Chicago Film Festival, USA,  
 October 1989

Bilbao International Film Festival,  
 Spain, November 1989

London Film Festival, London, UK,  
 November 1989

30th Festival dei Popoli, Florence, Italy,  
 November 1989

Documentary Festival of New York, USA

FESPACO XII Pan African Film Festival,  
 Burkina Faso, 1991

**Selected Awards**

The Grand Prize, Melbourne  
 International Film Festival, Australia,  
 June 1989

The Josef Von Sternberg Award,  
 Mannheim International Film Festival,  
 Germany, October 1989

The Gold Hugo for Best Documentary,  
 Chicago International Film Festival,  
 Chicago, USA, October 1989

Documentary Award, The National Black  
 Programming Consortium, Columbus,  
 Ohio, USA, November 1989

International Documentary Association  
 Award, Los Angeles, USA,  
 November 1989

Special mention in Diaspora Section,  
 FESPACO XII Film Festival, Burkina Faso,  
 March 1991

**MYSTERIES OF JULY (1991)**

16mm colour film. Sound.  
 54 minutes.  
 BAFC in association with Channel Four.

*Credits*

Director: Reece Auguiste  
 Producer: Avril Johnson  
 Assistant Director: Antony Meyer  
 Lighting Cameraman:  
 Christopher Hughes  
 Camera Assistant: Seamus McGarvey  
 Sound: Trevor Mathison  
 Associate Producer: Lina Gopaul  
 Production Manager: Avril Johnson  
 Assistants to Producer: Devika Banerjee  
 Hilda Sealy

Production Designer: Kevin Rowe  
 Art Dept. Assistant:  
 William du la Murnine  
 Production Assistants: Raymond Oaka  
 David Lawson  
 Grip: Judith Stanley-Smith  
 Gaffer: Keith Osbourne  
 Sparks: Nigel Dobson  
 Steve Shepperd  
 Runner/Driver: Louise Shaw  
 Stills: Liam Longman  
 Editorial Consultant: John Akomfrah  
 Dubbing Editor: Michelle Baughan  
 Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
 Dubbing Studio: Glenthams Studios  
 Laboratory: Buck Film Labs  
 Negative Cutter: Frank Clarke  
 Special Effects: Studio 1  
 Titles: Plume Partners  
 Catering: CTB Coleman  
 Archive: BBC Enterprises  
 Photographs: Camera Press Network  
 Lennox Smillie  
 Voice-over Script: Reece Auguiste  
 Edward George  
 Production Company: BAFC  
 Research Consultant: Rashid Meer  
 Researcher: Reece Auguiste  
 Composer: Trevor Mathison  
 Additional Music: Johnny T.  
 Requiem 2000  
 Editor: Joy Chamberlain

*Cast*

Jamie: David Ruben  
 Young Girl: Annette Crooks  
 Young Boy: Sebastian Adams  
 Adolphe: Rabaak Adoti  
 Woman Mourning; Beverly Andrews  
 Mourner in Cemetery: Ian Poitier  
 Violinist: Johnny T.  
 Narrator: Peter Straker  
 Police Officers: Edward Anthony  
 Neale Birch  
 Phillip Childs  
 Mark Laville  
 David McEwan  
 Damian Wild  
 Guillaume Lemoine  
 Blair Peach: Nick Sadler  
 Parminder Atwel: Tariq Alibai  
 Museum Visitors: Kimberly Palmer  
 Venu Dhupa  
 Keith Palmer  
 Narrator: Peter Straker

*Interviewees*

Mrs L. Stewart  
 Raju Bhatt/Tony Ward  
 Parminder Atwal  
 Celia Stubbs  
 David Ransom  
 Gareth Pierce  
 Barnor Hesse  
 Chief Supt. Twist  
 Supt. Paul Mathias  
 Jeremy Corbyn M.P.

**Selected Screenings**

The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, Wells College, Aurora, USA, August 1991

Edinburgh Film Festival, UK, July 1991

Toronto Festival of Festivals, Canada, September 1991

Chicago International Film Festival, USA, October 1991

Ochos Negros Festival, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 1991

Viper Film Festival, Lucerne, Switzerland, October 1991

London International Film Festival, UK, November 1991

32nd Festival dei Popoli, Florence, Italy, November 1991

Oberhausen Film Festival, Germany, 1993

**Selected Awards**

Special Mention, Diaspora Section, FESPACO XII Film Festival, Burkina Faso, 1991

Special Jury Prize, Images Caribes Film Festival, Martinique, 1991

**WHO NEEDS A HEART (1991)**

16mm colour film. Sound.  
78 minutes.

BAFC in association with  
Channel Four/ ZDF.

*Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah  
 Producer: Lina Gopaul  
 Script: John Akomfrah  
 Edward George  
 Casting: John Akomfrah  
 Lina Gopaul  
 Casting Assistance: Sarah Bird  
 Associate Producer: Avril Johnson  
 Production Coordinator: Lina Gopaul  
 Assistant to Director: Reece Auguiste  
 Assistant to Producer: David Lawson  
 Production Assistant: Raymond Oaka  
 Production Company: BAFC  
 Unit Production Manager: Avril Johnson  
 Production Designer: Paul Cheetham  
 1st Assistant Director: Tony Meyer  
 Location Manager: David Lawson  
 Production Accountant; Lina Gopaul  
 Director of Photography: Nancy Schiesari  
 Camera Operators: Martin Shepperd  
 Mick Duffield  
 1st Assistant Camera: Seamus McGarvey  
 Patrick Morgan  
 2nd Assistant Camera: Hilda Sealy  
 Video Inserts: David Scott  
 Assistant: Edward George  
 Sound Mixer: Trevor Mathison  
 Sound Assistants: Maurice Hutchinson  
 Edward George  
 Continuity: C. Sutton-Osborne  
 Gaffers: Dean Williams  
 Keith Osborne  
 Sparks: Steve Shepperd

Grip: Judith Stanley-Smith  
 Production Designer: Paul Cheetham  
 Assistant to Designer: Patrick Bill  
 Storyboard: Karen Kelly  
 Property Master: Claire Russell  
 Action Props: David Lawson  
 Set Painter: Graham Johnston  
 Louis' Paintings: Keith Piper  
 Millie's Paintings: Claudette Johnson  
 Costume Designer: Katy Mcphee  
 Assistant Costume Designer:  
 Alice Normington  
 Make-up Artists: Alison Edwards  
 Lindy Shaw  
 Hairstylist: Donald Simpson Kent  
 Film Editor: Brand Thumim  
 Sound Designer: Trevor Mathison  
 Sound Editor: Michelle Baughan  
 Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
 Assistant Film Editor: Joanne Boatman  
 Assistant Sound Editor: Janice Cheddie  
 Researcher UK: Johanna  
 Janice Cheddie  
 Researchers USA/Jamaica/Trinidad:  
 Lina Gopaul  
 Avril Johnson  
 Negative Cutter: Frank Clarke  
 Titles: Plume Partners  
 Design Coordinator/Publicity:  
 Edward George  
 Violin Instructor: Johnny T.  
 Unit Stills Photography: Liam Longman  
 Unit Drivers/Runners: Jake Nava  
 Guillaume Lemoine

Runners: Kodwo Eshun  
 Orson Nava  
 Yvette Narlock  
 Laboratory: Bucks Motion Picture  
 Laboratories

*Cast*

Faith: Caroline Burghard  
 Sydney: Treva Etienne  
 Abigail: Ruth Gemmell  
 Naomi: Caroline Lee Johnson  
 Louis: Kwabena Manso  
 Millie: Cassie McFarlane  
 Jack: Ian Reddington  
 Simi: Mo Sesay  
 Dominic: Jay Villiers  
 Young Boy: Paul Fitzmaurice  
 Louis' girlfriends: Samantha Harvey  
 Tracey O'Connor  
 Young violin player 1: Chantelle la Rose  
 Young violin player 2: Danielle Scillitoe  
 Louis' heavy friend: Errol Shaker  
 Rent collector/spiv: Matthew Whittle

**Selected Screenings**

London Film Festival, UK, November 1991

Bombay International Film Festival, India, February 1992

Santa Barbara Film Festival, USA, March 1992

BAFC Retrospective, Antenna Cinema, Conegliano, Italy, March 1992

Sydney International Film Festival,  
Australia, June 1992

Melbourne International Film Festival,  
Australia, June 1992

BAFC Focus: Blacklight Film, Festival,  
Chicago, USA, August 1992

Viennale, Austria, October 1992

BAFC Retrospective, Carthage Film  
Festival, Tunisia, October 1992

Jamaican Film Festival, Kingston,  
March 1993

#### **Selected Awards**

Grand Prix Archive Usage, National Black  
Programming Consortium, Ohio, USA,  
November 1991

Best Film Sound Track, City Limits 1992

Best New Drama, Chicago Film Festival,  
1992

Grand Prize, Stockholm Film Festival, 1992

Jury Award, 39th Sydney Film Festival,  
June 1992

#### **A TOUCH OF THE TAR BRUSH (1991)**

16mm colour film. Sound.  
39 minutes.

BAFC for BBC TV.

#### *Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah

Producer: Lina Gopaul

Writer: John Akomfrah

Photography: David Scott

Sound: Trevor Mathison

Video Camera: Mick Duffield

Graphic Designer: Paul Bond

Production Assistants: David Lawson

Alexandra Briggs

Production Secretaries: Avril Johnson

Raymond Oaka

Researcher: Jefferson Bannis

Assistant Editor: Michelle Baughan

Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges

Editor: Robert Hargreaves

Series Producer: Sam Organ

#### *Interviewees*

Patsy Birch

Colin Birch

Alison Birch

John Birch

John Conteh

Gary Christian

Ann Quarless

George Quarless

Ray Quarless

Christine Quarless

#### **Selected Screenings**

Bombay International Film Festival, India,  
February 1992

Days of Independent Film, Augsburg,  
Germany, April 1992

#### **SEVEN SONGS FOR MALCOLM X (1993)**

16mm colour film. Sound.

53 minutes.

BAFC in association with Channel Four.

#### *Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah

Producer: Lina Gopaul

Writer/Researcher: John Akomfrah

Writer/Researcher: Edward George

Director of Photography: Arthur Jafa

Production Designer: Susan Dowlatshahi

Editor: Joy Chamberlain

Director: John Akomfrah

Sound Design/Recordist:

Trevor Mathison

Lighting Technician: Malik Hassan Sayeed

Production Manager: David Lawson

First Assistant Camera: John Bentham

Second Assistant Camera: Hilda Sealey

Additional Production Design:

Gary Simmons

Video 8 Camera: Hilda Sealey

Electricians: Mike Vasquez

Tony Santos

Assistant Film Editor: Julian Macdonald

Production Assistant: Raymond Oaka

Production Trainee USA: Vera Ritsuko

Calloway

Production Helper USA: Kym Ragusa

Lighting Trainees: David Flynn

Unit Drivers: Cyrille Phipps

John Ribeiro

Title Design: Chris Akklis

#### *Cast*

Reading the Autobiography of  
Malcolm X: Giancarlo Esposito

Reading the Commentary:

Toni Cade Bambara

Reading the FBI Files: Coco Fusco

Malcolm X: Darrick Harris

Malcolm's men: Danny Carter

Martin Boothe

Byron O. Hurlock

Edward George

Malcolm's mother: Tricia Rose

Malcolm's father: Theodore L. Cash

Young Malcolm: Olamide Faison

Young girls: Tiffany Nelson

Tiffany Tate

#### *Interviewees*

Wilfred Little

Dr. Betty Shabazz

Spike Lee

Greg Tate

Hassan El-Sayeed

Yuri Kochiyama

Thulani Davis

Robin Kelley

Patricia Williams

William Kunstler

Imam Benjamin Karim

A. Peter Bailey

John Henrik Clarke

Peter Goldman

James Farmer

Jan Carew

Malcolm Jarvis

**Selected Screenings**

Seattle International Film Festival, USA, May 1993

Sydney International Film Festival, Australia, June 1993

Melbourne International Film Festival, Australia, June 1993

Locarno International Film Festival, Italy, August 1993

Robert Flaherty Seminar, Aurora, USA, August 1993

World Film Festival, Montreal, Canada, September 1993

Toronto Festival of Festivals, Canada, September 1993

Festival Dei Popoli, Florence, Italy, September 1983

BAFC Retrospective, Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, New York, USA, April 1994

**Selected Awards**

Certificate of Merit: History/Documentary, Chicago International Film Festival, 1993

Winner, Historical Documentary and Community Commendation, National Black Programming Consortium Award, Ohio, 1993

Best Feature Length Non-Fiction Film, First

Film Festival of Black Culture, Paris, 1993

Best Feature Length Documentary, Image D'Ailleurs, International Festival of Black Culture and Music, Paris, January 1994

Award Winner, Prized Pieces Film Festival, Ohio, November 1993

**THE MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION (1995)**

Video. Sound.  
30 minutes.  
Channel 4/ZDF/Arte.

**THE LAST ANGEL OF HISTORY (1995)**

Video. Sound.  
45 minutes.  
ZDF/Arte.

*Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah

Producers: Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson

Production Manager: David Lawson

Writer/Researcher: Edward George

Researchers: Kodwo Eshun  
Floyd Webb

Production Assistant: Raymond Oaka

Camera Operator: David Scott

Sound Recordist: Trevor Mathison

Rostrum: Bunny Schendler

Digital Animation: Pervaiz Khan

Dubbing Editor: Peter Hodges

The Sound Designers

Editor: Justin Amsden

Original Music: Trevor Mathison

*Cast*

Edward George: The Data Thief

*Interviewees*

Juan Atkins  
Mike Banks  
Octavia Butler  
George Clinton  
John Corbett  
Carl Craig  
Samuel R. Delany  
Kodwo Eshun  
Goldie  
Ishmael Reed  
A Guy Called Gerald  
Bernard J. Harris Jr.  
Derrick May  
Nichelle Nichols  
DJ Spooky  
Greg Tate

**Selected Screenings**

Bombay International Film Festival, February 1995

EYZ Kino, Berlin, March 1996

Chromapark, Berlin, April 1996

Toronto International Film Festival, September 1996

Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam, December 1996

Rotterdam International Documentary Film Festival, January 1997

**Selected Awards**

Transmediale Award for Best Video/TV-Production, Berlin 1997

Prix Paul Robeson For Cinema, FESPACO XVII Pan African Film Festival, Burkina Faso, 1996

**3 SONGS ON PAIN, LIGHT AND TIME (1995)**

Video. Colour. Sound. 25 minutes.  
Arts Council of England.

*Credits*

Director: Edward George

Director: Trevor Mathison

Producer: David Lawson

Script: Edward George

Photography: Mike Duffield

Writer/Researcher: Edward George

Original Music/Sound Recordist: Trevor Mathison

Editor: James Edmonds

Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges

On-Line Editor: Bill Ogden

On-Line Edit Assistant: Kirsten Sudbury

Rostrum: Ken Morse

Camera Operator: Mick Duffield

Production Driver: Kim Best

Lighting Electricians: Mark French  
Jason Berman

Arts Council Supervisor:  
James van der Pool

Production Company: Black Audio Films

Sponsor: Arts Council of England

*Interviewees*

Brenda Agard  
Mora Byrd  
Sonia Boyce  
Rita Keegan  
Donald Rodney  
Diane Simon  
Marlene Smith

**MEMORY ROOM 451 (1997)**

Video. Colour. 22 minutes.  
ZDF/Arte.

*Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah  
Producer: Avril Johnson  
Writer: Edward George  
Production Manager: David Lawson  
Director of Photography:  
Jonathan Collinson  
Additional Photography: Dewald Akeuma  
Sound Recordist: Trevor Mathison  
Wardrobe: Ajays  
Hairstylist: Gigi  
Editor: Liz Green  
On-Line Editor: James Cooper  
Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
Animation: Trevor Mathison  
Pervaiz Khan  
Gary Stewart  
Narrator: Cyril Niri  
Production Trainee: Selina Francis  
Original Music: Hallucinator  
Archive: Black Audio Films  
Commissioning Editor (ZDF/Arte):

Kathrin Brinkman  
Production Company: Black Audio Films

*Cast*

Preacher: Brian Bovell  
Mother: Jo Martin  
Prisoner: Cyril Niri  
Daughter: Claire Perkins  
Zoot Suit: Mo Sesay  
Aliens: James Akingbola  
Patricia Gibson Howell  
Laura Sampredo  
Daniella Wol

**Selected Screenings**

Ist Jeonju International Film Festival,  
Seoul, 2000  
Mumbai International Film Festival, 2006

**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING:****DAYS OF HOPE (1997)**

Video. Colour.  
60 minutes.  
BBCTV/ Arts and Entertainment  
Channel USA.

*Credits*

Director: John Akomfrah  
Producer: Lina Gopaul  
Narrator: Hugh Quarshie  
With special thanks: Avril Johnson  
Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges  
Sound/Composed Music:  
Trevor Mathison  
Photography: Dewald Akeuma

Production Manager: David Lawson  
Writer: Edward George  
Editor: Nick Follows  
Executive Producer: Tim Kirby

*Interviewees*

Harry Belafonte  
Howard Baugh  
Taylor Branch  
Rev. Marcus Wood  
Betty Moitz  
Rev. John T. Porter  
Jean Jackson  
David Garrow  
Andrew Young  
Harris Wofford  
Rev. James Lawson  
Dr. Wyatt Walker  
Dorothy Cotton  
Georgia David Powers

**Selected Screenings**

Toronto International Film Festival,  
September 1997

**GANGSTA GANGSTA: THE TRAGEDY  
OF TUPAC SHAKUR (1998)**

Video. Colour. Sound.  
45 minutes.  
Channel Four.

*Credits*

Director: Edward George  
Producer: Avril Johnson  
Narrator: Burt Caesar  
Sound Recordist: Trevor Mathison

Original Music: The Fratelli Brothers  
Dubbing Mixer: Peter Hodges at The  
Sound Designers  
Rostrum: Ken Morse  
Camera Operator: M. Watts  
On-Line Editor: Clive Mattocks  
Editor: Lisa Harney  
Associate Producer: David Lawson  
Production Company: Black Audio Films

*Interviewees*

Connie Bruck  
Buckshot  
Cheo Coka  
Billy Garland  
Dru Ha  
Andre Harrell  
Rob Marriott  
Charles Ogletree  
Kevin Powell  
Cathy Scott  
Mutulu Shakur  
Watani Tyehimba

### The second category of BAFC work

consists of media research projects, only sections of which were ever made public. The substantive body of these projects remained internal to the group where they functioned as resources of knowledge production to be reconfigured for multiple projects.

#### Coming Sunday (1982–85)

An investigation into Afrodiasporic rituals of worship via 35mm slide, video and sound.

#### Different Desires (1983–85)

Variouly described as a film on 'race and labour', 'an investigation into the machinery and history of colonial terror' and 'a study of Pentecostalism as a political space', *Different Desires* might be described as a media research project constituted around the political economy of the surplus underclass. Auguiste developed a script around these notions, elements of which eventually found their way into the remarkable voice-over script for *Handsworth Songs*; the final sequence in *Handsworth Songs*, in which Claire Joseph is seen walking away from the camera, was filmed initially for *Different Desires*.

#### The Body in Pain (1984–86)

A film about the black body as a cultural text upon which are inscribed zones of pain both personal and public. Invariably described as a film about 'memory and

pain' the research project was conceived as a series of semi-autobiographical explorations of colonial and post-colonial subject conditions. The initial points of narrative departure for the film were the autobiographies of members of Black Audio Film Collective.

#### A Long Way From Home (working title) (1984–86)

Based on the life of the Jamaican poet, novelist and Trotskyite activist Claude McKay (1889–1948), this project was conceived as a documentary drama that would explore McKay's political and literary work in colonial Jamaica, the Harlem Renaissance, the Soviet Union and Harlem where he returned to live in obscurity.

#### In The Garden of Heavenly Rest (1989)

A film about the life of folklorist, novelist and voodoo priestess Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960), the project was conceived as a geographical journey on the notions of Afrodiasporic spirituality and the embodiment of black life in letters. The film was to feature novelist and poet Ishmael Reed who would navigate Hurston's extraordinary life, from rural Florida, the Harlem Renaissance and New Orleans Voodoo ceremonies concluding with her final journey to an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida called The Garden of Heavenly Rest.

#### The Forest of Things (1993)

A research project on the reverberations of the 1989 *Satanic Verses* affair that sought to configure the controversy as a 'forest of stories'. The film was conceived as a series of 14 self-contained mini-essays and micro-dissertations that performed a juxtaposition of multiple experiences and perspectives, thereby highlighting the condition of disjunctive temporality that characterised the entire affair.

### The third category of work consists

of documentations of events that were either commissioned, invited or self-initiated. In its early years, the Collective functioned as a mobile archival unit, ready to document events as and when they occurred. Indeed *Handsworth Songs* began its life as just such a document; its evolution into the work we know today, and its consequent success, made subsequent archival projects more difficult.

#### TUC: Black Sections (1984)

Documentation of the 1984 Trade Union Congress held in Blackpool that focused on the debates over black representation within the Labour Party.

#### The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1984)

Documentation of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo's 1976 dramatisation of the 1957 trial of the Kenyan anti-colonial revolutionary, staged at the Africa

Centre, Covent Garden in 1984.

#### Theatre of Black Women (1984)

Documentation on the work of Patricia Hilaire and poet Bernadine Evaristo, founders of Theatre of Black Women. Photographs taken during rehearsals were developed as slide film which were then inscribed and projected.

#### C.L.R. James (1985)

Documentation of an interview with C.L.R. James, the Trotskyite theorist, essayist, activist, novelist and dramatist, (1901–1989). Granted to BAFC at the offices of the Race Today Collective, Railton Road, Brixton, on February 20th 1985. Screened at the ceremony for the naming of the C.L.R. James Library, Hackney 1985.

#### The Black and Asian Miners Support Group (1985)

Documentation of benefit event hosted by the Black and Asian Miners Support Group to raise money for miners during the strike of 1985.

#### Black Artists, White Institutions Conference (1985)

Documentation of conference held at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, London, on November 5th 1985 on the political economy and institutional frameworks of Afrodiasporic and Asian cultural production.

**Race and Technology Conference (1985)**

Documentation of one-day conference held in Camden, London hosted by activist and researcher Rashid Meer.

**Les Mystères des Voix Bulgères (1987)**

The Collective listened closely to the music of Les Mystères des Voix Bulgères throughout 1986 to 1987. The documentation of the first live performance in London of Les Mystères des Voix Bulgères was commissioned by producer Joe Boyd.

**Syllables of Revolution (1987)**

Documentation of a four-day programme of events in honour of American poet and activist June Jordan, with guest speaker Angela Davis. Filmed at Battersea Arts Centre, London, in September 1987

**In the fourth category of production,** the artists of BAFC worked, either separately or collaboratively, in a consultative or advisory capacity on projects initiated by other film-makers and artists or sometimes by the Collective itself; the Collective here acted as the host organisation for a specific project, providing a support structure for the artist; in film vernacular, the group could be said to have 'warehoused' these projects.

**On Duty (1984)**

16mm colour film. Sound. 52 minutes. Channel Four

Set during the National Health Service dispute of 1984, *On Duty* is a dramatic reconstruction of the struggles and strengths of black ancillary workers in hospitals facing short staffing and closures.

Director: Cassie McFarlane

Producer: Julian Henriquez

Script: Michael McMillan

Consultant: John Akomfrah

Set Designer: John Akomfrah

Set Designer: Trevor Mathison

Assistant Sound: Isaac Julien

**Emergence (1986)**

16mm colour film. Sound. 18 minutes. Channel Four

Parmar's debut documentary explored notions of diaspora aesthetics and cultural translation through the practice of four female aesthetic activists: conceptual artist Mona Hatoum, poet Audre Lorde, painter Sutapa Biswas and poet Meiling Jin. Aside from its script, *Emergence* bears the signature of BAFC in Mathison's radical concrete sound design, its diagonal framing, its use of shadow and its interest in interference patterns that disrupt the stability of the image.

Director: Pratibha Parmar

Producer: Avril Johnson

Consultant: John Akomfrah

Script: Edward George and Pratibha Parmar

Sound: Trevor Mathison

**In the National Interest? (1986)**

16mm colour film. Sound. 52 minutes. Channel Four

Produced in association with Derry Film and Video, Sankofa, TUTV, Open Eye, Sheffield Asian Film and Video, Trade Films, Biased Tapes, Faction Films, Albany Video, Women in Sync, Films at Work, Belfast Independent Video, Another View, and Activision Studios, Black Audio Film Collective look at the conflicts in British society between individual and law and ask why the law clashes so often with notions of democracy and justice.

**Race, Education and Society: The Burden of Representation Part Two: Film and Video Makers (1992)**

Documentary for the Open University that examined the notion of representation in cultural practice.

Presenter: Kobena Mercer

Interviewee: Pratibha Parmar

Interviewee: Lina Gopaul

Interviewee: Reece Auguiste

**The Darker Side of Black (1994)**

16mm colour film. Sound. 59 minutes. BBC2

Documentary feature that explored the multiple ambivalences, tensions and antagonisms at work in the volatile musical cultures of Jamaican dancehall and American gangster rap. Black Audio Films were the first independent production company to work with the prestigious BBC television documentary series *Arena*.

Production Company: Black Audio Films

Director: Isaac Julien

Producer: Lina Gopaul

Consultant: John Akomfrah

Script: Edward George and Isaac Julien

Music: Trevor Mathison

Director of Photography: Arthur Jafa

**Black Cabs (1994)**

Video. Colour. 30 minutes. Channel Four

A portrait of life behind the wheel; moments from a job that negotiates the defiant parochialism of the everyday.

Director: Ruppert Gabriel

Production Company: BAFC

Producer: Lina Gopaul

**The fifth category consists of work**

commissioned by production companies outside of BAFC. This includes sound design and scores composed for cinema by Trevor Mathison, film directed by Reece Auguiste, film produced by Avril Johnson and film directed by John Akomfrah.

**Once Upon A Time (1991)**

16mm colour film. 30 minutes. BBC2

A bedtime story told by Grace, a young African mother, to her two children becomes the metaphor for the mother's own life. Metaphor gives way to irony; fable is contrasted with the mother's quotidian routine, as character, location and situation become zones of imaginative inhabitation.

Director: Ian Roberts  
Sound: Trevor Mathison

**Moment of Sacrifice (1992)**

Beta SP. 16mm colour film.  
Sound. 60 minutes.

Documentary about four African-Americans and their efforts to transform their rural community of Marianna, Eastern Arkansas, USA.

Writer/Director: Reece Auguiste

**Messin' Up God's Glory (1993)**

16mm colour film. Sound. 15 minutes.

Film-poem that combined allusive imagery with scenes of women's oppression in an oblique statement on the practice of female genital mutilation in contemporary Africa.

Director: Afua Namiley-Vlana  
Producer: Avril Johnson

**Lush Life (1994)**

Video. Colour. Sound. 30 minutes. ITV

Documentary poem set in Northern England in which poet and dramatist Cheryl Mann travels to Hulme, Toxteth and Glossop to meditate with fellow artists on questions of belonging.

Director: John Akomfrah

**Fathers, Sons and Unholy Ghosts (1994)**

16mm colour film. Sound. 11 minutes.  
Channel Four

Drama on the struggles of a young man learning to be a father whilst coming to terms with being a son.

Director: Danny Thompson  
Music: Trevor Mathison  
Edward George

**Voices in the Dark (1996)**

Video. Colour. Sound. 60 minutes.  
Channel Four

Historian Carlo Ginzburg navigates his most celebrated work, *The Cheese and the Worms*, in which a sixteenth-century miller from a small village in Italy was denounced for his heretical views and burnt at the stake.

Director: John Akomfrah

**Speak Like a Child (1998)**

35mm colour film. Sound. 77 minutes.  
British Film Institute

Fictional drama of the complex relationship between three young friends, Sammy, Billy and Ruby, whose lives are altered

irrevocably by an event that spirals out of control.

Director: John Akomfrah  
Production Company: British Film Institute

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Jean Fisher studied Zoology and Fine Art, later becoming a freelance writer on contemporary art and issues of post-coloniality. She is the former editor of the international quarterly *Third Text*, and the editor of the anthologies, *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (1994), *Re-verberations: Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency* (2000) and, with Gerardo Mosquera, *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (2004). A selection of her essays, *Vampire in the Text*, was published in 2003. She currently teaches at the Royal College of Art, London, and is Professor of Fine Art and Transcultural Studies at Middlesex University.

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Kobena Mercer is Reader in Diaspora Studies in the Department of Visual Culture and Media at Middlesex University London, and is an inaugural recipient of the 2006 Clark Prize for Excellence in Arts Writing. He has taught at New York University and University of California at Santa Cruz and received fellowships from Cornell University and the New School University in New York. His first book, *Welcome to the Jungle* (1994), opened new lines of enquiry in art, film and photography, and his writings feature in several landmark anthologies, including *Out There* (1990), *Cultural Studies* (1992), *Art and its Histories* (1998) and *Theorizing Diaspora* (2003). His monographs include James VanDer Zee, Adrian Piper, Isaac Julien, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Keith Piper. He is editor of *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (2005) and *Discrepant Abstraction* (2006), in the Annotating Art's Histories series on cross-cultural perspectives in 20th century art.

### The Otolith Group

The Otolith Group was founded in 2002 by Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun. The Group is based in London. Its work engages with archival materials, with futurity and with the histories of transnationality. The Group sees its work as a series of explorations

with film, video, sound, text and curatorial practice that observe different affective and aesthetic registers, creating platforms for discussion on contemporary art practice. The Group's work has featured in many recent exhibitions including *Just in Time*, The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2006), *The Unhomely: 2nd International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville* (2006), *How to Improve the World: 60 Years of British Art*, Hayward Gallery (2006), *Ecotopia: The Second International Centre of Photography Triennial of Photography and Video*, ICP New York (2006), *New British Art: The 3rd Tate Triennale*, Tate Britain (2006) and *Homeworks III*, Beirut (2005).

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Kodwo Eshun is author of the acclaimed book *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998). His recent essays are published in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.* (2006), *Back to Black: Art, Cinema & the Racial Imaginary* (2005), *David Adjaye: Making Public Buildings* (2004) and in the journals *Science Fiction Studies* (2007), *Wasafiri* (2004) and *NKA* (2003). Eshun is Course Leader of the MA in Aural and Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

### Anjalika Sagar

Anjalika Sagar is founder of *Multitudes*, the independent news network established in 2000, dedicated to the distribution of alternative information on art, culture, tactical media and politics informed by the multiple perspectives of the Global South.

### Okwui Enwezor

Okwui Enwezor is the Dean of Academic Affairs at San Francisco Art Institute and Adjunct Curator at the International Center of Photography. He was the Artistic Director of *Documenta 11* and the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial. As curator, writer, and critic, Enwezor's work has been mainly focused on the critical reception of post-colonial practice in contemporary art and the effects of globalisation and transnational politics on its methods. Most recently he curated *The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society* for the 2nd Seville Biennial of Contemporary Art (BIACS 2) in Seville, Spain for which he also served as the Artistic Director; *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*; and *Work Zones: Thirty Years of Contemporary Art at San Francisco Art Institute*. He is at work on two exhibitions: *Archive Fever: Photography Between Document and History* and *Invention of Africa: The First Century of Photography, 1839–1939*. Enwezor received the 2006 Frank Jewett Mather Award for Criticism from College Art Association.

# LIST OF WORKS

1. *Signs of Empire*, 1982–84  
Black Audio Film Collective, slide tape,  
black and white, sound, 22 mins. Transferred DVD
2. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
John Akomfrah, 16 mm, colour, sound, 59 mins. Transferred DVD
3. *Testament*, 1988  
John Akomfrah, 16mm, colour, sound, 77 mins.  
Transferred DVD
4. *Twilight City*, 1989  
Reece Auguste, 16mm, colour, sound, 52 mins. Transferred DVD
5. *Mysteries of July*, 1991  
Reece Auguste, 16mm, colour, sound, 52 mins. Transferred DVD
6. *Who Needs a Heart*, 1991  
John Akomfrah, 16mm, colour, sound, 78 mins.  
Transferred DVD
7. *A Touch of the Tar Brush*, 1991  
John Akomfrah, 16mm, colour, sound, 39 mins.  
Transferred DVD
8. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993  
John Akomfrah, 16mm, colour, sound, 53 mins.  
Transferred DVD
9. *The Last Angel of History*, 1995  
John Akomfrah, Digibeta, colour, sound, 45 mins. Transferred DVD
10. *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time*, 1995  
Trevor Mathison, Edward George, Digibeta, colour, sound,  
25 mins. Transferred DVD
11. *Martin Luther King: Days of Hope*, 1997  
John Akomfrah, Digibeta, colour, sound, 60 mins.  
Transferred DVD
12. *Memory Room 451*, 1997  
John Akomfrah, Digibeta, colour, sound, 22 mins.  
Transferred DVD
13. *Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur*, 1998  
Edward George, Digibeta, colour, sound, 40 mins.  
Transferred DVD
14. *The Black Room*, 2007  
8 x perspex boxes, 7 x perspex panes, 2 x granite plinths,  
2 x wood plinths, wood casing, light box, piano hammer,  
213.36 x 121.92cm
15. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
Original poster, paper backed, perspex frame, 153 x 104cm
16. *Testament*, 1988  
Original poster, paper backed, perspex frame, 101 x 157cm
17. *Twilight City*, 1989  
Original poster, paper backed, iron frame, 77.5 x 104cm
18. *Mysteries of July*, 1991  
Original poster, paper backed, perspex frame, 104 x 78cm
19. *Who Needs a Heart*, 1991  
Original poster, paper backed, perspex frame, 79 x 105cm

## 5 x Vitrines

Perspex, 50 x 90 x 12.5 x 8.5cm

### Vitrine 1

20. *Cinema and Black Representation*,  
Screening series one, 1983  
Poster, paper, black and white, 21 x 29.6cm
21. *Cinema and Black Representation*,  
Screening series one, 1983  
Poster, paper, 42.2 x 52.5cm
22. *Race Traces: Cinema & 'The Community'*,  
Screening series two, 1985  
Transparency mounted on cardboard, black and white,  
29.6 x 20.9cm
23. *Race Traces: Cinema and 'The Community'*,  
Screening series two, 1985  
Statement, paper mounted on hardboard, 21 x 29.6cm
24. *Black and Third World Focus*:  
Screening series three, October  
Statement, paper mounted on hardboard, 29.6 x 21cm
25. *Visions and Revisions*  
16mm film familiarisation course, 1985  
Advertisement, paper, black & white, 21 x 29.6cm
26. *The Positive Image*  
Screening series four, 1986  
Poster programme, gloss, paper, colour, 29.7 x 42cm
27. *Visions and Revisions*  
16mm film familiarisation course, 1985  
Poster, gloss, colour, 59.2 x 42.4cm
28. *Looking Black*  
16mm film familiarisation course, 1985  
Statement, cardboard, grey, 21 x 32.3cm
29. *Re-Imagining: Race, Image, Movement*  
16mm film course, 1985  
Poster, gloss, paper colour, 29.7 x 20.6cm

### Vitrine 2

30. *Signs of Empire*, 1982–84  
Word processed script
31. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
Typed script draft
32. *Twilight City*, 1989  
Typed treatment
33. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993  
Word processed voiceover commentary
34. *Mothership Connections*, 1995  
Word processed essay draft
35. *Three Songs on Time Pain & Light*, 1995  
Word processed script
36. *Hair*, 1997  
Word processed script

### Vitrine 3

37. *Expeditions*, 1982–1984  
Poster, paper, 20.9 x 29.6cm

38. *Expeditions*, 1982–4  
Poster, paper, 29.6 x 20.7cm
39. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
Poster, gloss, 21 x 29.6cm
40. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
Flyer, card, 15.2 x 21.1cm
41. *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
Theatrical release flyer, paper, 21 x 14.5cm
42. *Testament*, 1988  
Invitation card, 10.5 x 14.5cm
43. *Testament*, 1988  
Publicity card, double sided, 15.1 x 25cm
44. *Twilight City*, 1989  
Publicity card, matt, 14.7 x 21cm
45. *Mysteries of July*, 1991  
Poster, paper, gloss, 29.6 x 21cm
46. *Who Needs a Heart*, 1991  
Envelope, paper, 22.7 x 32.5cm
47. *A Touch of the Tar Brush*, 1991  
Postcard, 10.1 x 15.2cm
48. *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993  
Postcard, gloss, 14.9 x 21cm
49. *Three Songs on Pain, Time and Light*, 1995  
Publicity card, gloss, 14.9 x 21cm
50. *The Last Angel of History*, 1995  
Invitation postcard, sepia tone, 12.6 x 17.6cm

### Vitrine 4

51. Mathison, Akomfrah, Joseph, George, 1984  
Sarah Saunders/ © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 20.3 x 25.3cm
52. BAFC after winning Grierson Award, 1987  
British Film Institute © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 16.4 x 21.6cm
53. Lina Gopaul, John Akomfrah during acceptance speech for  
Grierson Award, 1987  
British Film Institute/ © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 16.4 x 21.6cm
54. BAFC, Janice Cheddie, researcher, 1991  
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55. John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul  
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Photograph, 20.2 x 25.3cm
56. BAFC, 1987  
Suzanne Walstrom/ © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 21.7 x 30.6cm
57. BAFC, 1989  
Nigel Parry/ © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 40.3 x 30.3cm
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Nigel Parry/ © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 40.3 x 30.3cm
59. BAFC, 1989  
Nigel Parry/ © BAFC Trust  
Photograph, 40.3 x 30.3cm

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60. Grand Prix, Kaleidoscope International Immigrant Film  
Festival, *Handsworth Songs*, 1986  
Glass mounted on wooden base, 10.5 x 4.3 x 8cm
61. The First Paul Robeson Prize for Cinema,  
*Handsworth Songs*, 1987  
Bronze mounted on wooden base, 5.6 x 31.9 x 29.6cm
62. The John Grierson Award for Social Documentary,  
*Handsworth Songs*, 1987  
Bronze mounted on granite block, 13 x 8.7 x 8.7cm
63. Proclamation, City of Atlanta, Black Audio Film Collective  
Day, October 18 1987  
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64. Certificate of Recognition presented to Black Audio Film  
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Card, 35 x 27.2cm
65. Prized Pieces Annual International Video and Film Award,  
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Glass, perspex mounted on wood, 34 x 22.6cm
66. Distinguished Documentary Achievement, International  
Documentary Association, *Twilight City*, 1989  
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72. Certificate of Merit, Chicago International Film Festival  
*Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, 1993  
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73. Preis für die beste Video/TV-Produktion, Transmedia '97  
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74. Prix Paul Robeson, Festival Panafrican du Cinema  
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## CREDITS

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Kilburn Cemetery, London  
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36. Edward George and Lina Gopaul, Handsworth, Birmingham, UK, 1985.  
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38. Sebastian Shah, director of photography, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham, UK, 1985.  
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39. John Akomfrah, Handsworth, Birmingham, UK, 1985.  
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183. Looking Black film familiarisation course outline, 1985.  
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