

Handsworth Songs:

Audiences / Aesthetics / Independence Interview with the Black Audio Collective

Paul Gilroy and Jim Pines

PG: I want to start with a question concerning audience. Presumably there is a community for whom you make films. How would you define that community?

Reece Auguiste: I don't believe that there is any monolithic or singular community for whom we are making films. In production, the question of audience is almost a secondary issue. The only notion of an audience that one has is that which is purely imaginary. It is imaginary in the sense that when the film is completed and screened, a diverse group of people have the opportunity to view it. I suppose, in the last analysis, the concept of the imaginary provides us with a broad definition of an audience for whom films are made. Broadly speaking, our films are made for Diasporic peoples. That appears to be the only organic link that, as film-makers, we have with a working notion of audience. If for example our films are screened in Brazil, then, of course, we consider it just as important as if the product had been screened in the London Borough of Hackney [where Black Audio Film Collective are based]. That is what I mean by the audience as an imaginary construction, an imaginary amalgam of peoples.

John Akomfrah: If you had asked us that question in 1983 we would have said "black people", in that there is no question that we intended to make films for black people. But what has happened is that we have developed, we have come to realise that to say just that is not enough. When the question of audience is asked it is usually addressed in terms of a marketing strategy: they want to know specifically what sort of black audience one is referencing, so that they can fly-post or leaflet them; or they want to know the political question dictating the issues raised by a film or video, or whatever necessarily inscribes in it a voice, i.e. a certain kind of film readership which is not immediately apparent from the film. Clearly, our films are made from a black perspective. But the more one continues to want to get the films shown in centres which are largely dominated by art cinema, other audiences must be taken into consideration. That seems to me to be obvious. And the main problem for us at the moment is to build up a series of alliances which you can then call upon which stretches from, say, a community

centre in Hackney, and being told by those people that the films are relevant and political, to a kind of European film festival circuit. That is the broad range of audience which you hope the film could create. The question of audience is therefore a strategic one.

PG: So you are in agreement with the position that Reece takes when he says that in showing a film in Brazil and showing it in Hackney, that there is no differentiation in terms of your own sense of what you're doing because of different publics?

JA: Well, I understand why Reece conceptualised audiences as an imaginary question, in the sense that you don't have persons that you can pinpoint. So when you are working on a film or trying to make a film, you have a series of imaginary areas or constituencies where you think the film would work, and that could be Hackney in East London or Brazil. For me, it's much more direct than that, but I think the imaginary component is still important. I think the idea that you make a film and not be completely certain of all the possible areas in which it could be exhibited, isn't a bad thing.

Lina Gopaul: I think there are problems when people, from both the left and the right, pose those questions and actually misconstrue the concerns of the film, which then leads them directly to an idea of what constitutes an audience. Because a film concerns itself with a black perspective, it's therefore taken that it should be a film for black people. That is where I always find it most problematic. The logic is actually quite crude because what one is saying is that you have a black subject matter and, therefore, it should be for black people. That is a very limited definition of an audience.

JP: But isn't there another problem to do with language? It seems to me that the cinematic language you adopt might actually connect with something more specific than imaginary audiences; the film might suit a certain kind of audience which one would like to identify with that film. So there is a corollary question which says, for example, "well, the film employs a certain language or cinematic style, so therefore it must be aimed at the art cinema audience." How do you resolve this?

JA: In a way that is part of the problem, that you are acutely aware of the sorts of receptions that you get for particular kinds of films coming out of the workshop sector, not just from Black Audio Film Collective but also from other experimental units. For certain languages of black politics these films have played a transgressive function. They are seen as going off the pale of acceptable discourse. The problem then becomes one of partly not allowing critics to determine your film sense. When they argue that the language is transgressive, then it logically follows that you can't seriously be interested in black politics, that you are making films for somebody else. The challenge for us, in terms of mapping out questions of audiences, is to say to our critics and audiences that ultimately this project would be a failure if black people did not think it was worthwhile. However, that doesn't mean

that we are not prepared to argue for the validity of something which is ostensibly going against the grain of a commonsense assumption of what constitutes black politics.

THE DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE

PG: You are saying that the film is made from a black perspective, but isn't the notion of a black perspective just as evasive as what you are retreating from, which is to say you are making films that automatically correspond with the needs of this imaginary black public?

RA: That's why I used the term "black" as a component of the diaspora which encompasses a wider social geography, which has a plurality of articulations, of history, politics, languages and cultural forms. I am prepared to embrace that kind of definition instead of one where the term "black" becomes a central organising category of a nationalist discourse, which is precisely the discursive field that I wish to move away from in order to explore other avenues.

JP: The notion of the diaspora is generally defined in relation to a unitary cultural sphere; but you seem to be saying that it can actually incorporate disparate cultural groups and experiences, that you can bring people from various cultural backgrounds and histories under the diasporic umbrella.

RA: Not necessarily bring them together but to touch some of their sensibilities. The Hispanic experience is very different from the experiences of those who occupy the English-speaking Caribbean, because those experiences are structured by different engagements with Europe and different engagements within the geographical space that we call the diaspora. So there exists the possibility to tap into that diversity of sensibilities which might have, on a metaphysical level, a unitary dimension, but in its materiality that unitary field has no existence because of its diversity.

JA: What is apparent about the work we do is that it's a product of a particular strategy - of what Homi Bhabha calls "hybridisation". Almost everybody who works here has in many ways been influenced by or has engaged with or has been genuinely interpolated by a whole series of film-making discourses, some European, some Third World, others British. I think what one attempts to do is to reformulate the filmic agenda, in which the strategy simultaneously undermines and inaugurates a new black cinema; where it is apparent that questions of anger or of reflexivity are not enough; that the moral imperative which usually characterises black films, which empowers them to speak with a sense of urgency, that one needs a combination of all those things in order to speak of black film-making.

The advantage of that is, we don't have an epistemological

commitment to 1970s Godard cinema or to 1960s Cuban cinema. One is aware of being influenced by those filmic practices, and one appropriates from them in an attempt to participate in a deconstruction and reformulation of the agenda of black politics in this country. That's where the language issue for me is constructive, that's where it makes sense because questions have been posed in the following manner: "Don't you think that the difficulty of the language you use necessarily ostracises or de-enfranchises certain kinds of people?" The answer is "no". It is much more honest to say: We are products of these hybrids, these convergencies; we are a kind of Jekyll and Hyde grouping in the post-industrial sense, and one tries to speak with integrity and honesty by recognising those tributaries.

Eddie George: Probably that point takes us back to the question of diaspora. Hybridisation explains that diasporic constituency quite well. I would imagine that audiences that come to see the work we do are as much a hybrid as we are. Their experiences are not as differentiated as ours, historically and politically, therefore I don't think it's a monumental problem.

LG: It seems to me that we expend a huge amount of time providing justifications for the way in which we have decided to conduct our film-making practice, and that is a position which I believe our predecessors in the 1970s did not have to contend with. We are still in the process of development and we should be allowed that space to develop.

THE AESTHETICS QUESTION

JA: One of the advantages we have over our predecessors – and it's quite unique – is that there is now this space for reflection on these questions, whereas before it was assumed through an essentialist discourse that if you were a black film-maker, that necessarily meant you had all the arguments worked out on what black film-making is. But now there is the space for acute reflection, both on the uncertainties and the certainties. It is important that this continues. The central ideal which overrides all kinds of aesthetic considerations in *Handsworth Songs*, is in some ways to put across a multi-layered text which, if it doesn't specify, at least hints at the possibility that there is no singular origin to the disturbances; and that if there were, it is so bound up with a multiplicity of issues to do with housing, policing, etc. that it would have been incorrect to isolate one and say this is the unitary cause of it. So the aesthetic quest was in some ways to put across an impressionistic collage of a series of moments, a series of becomings, a series of moments of solitude, ostensibly, which as they

threaten to be moments of solitude are recuperated into race and become racial questions. If nothing else, the film was a polemic against the usual representations of the riots that took place in Handsworth. We had six months to think about how it was reported, and to think about what an alternative reportage of it could be.

- RA:** The question of aesthetics and cinema has its own history of debate. *Handsworth Songs* is a documentary film, of course, but in order to produce or construct visually the ideas that John has expounded upon, we had to re-examine the history of documentary film practice itself. We were concerned as to whether or not those categories were themselves capable of articulating the ideas that we wanted to work with. By scrutinising the documentary form, we were locked into a position where we had to recast questions of aesthetics, since the two are somehow linked. I can understand why some critics had severe reservations about the film, because those reservations were, I believe, premised upon an erroneous idea of what documentary film practice is. In addition to that, certain critics already had their own ideas about what constituted race politics in the 1980s and the manner in which it could be visually articulated. As a film document, *Handsworth Songs* completely transgressed those assumptions to do with cinema, politics and aesthetics in the documentary genre.
- EG:** On the one hand, you can view it as quite transgressive; given the context of the film, it would appear a bit dodgy, a bit transgressive in relation to conventional ["race relations"] documentaries. On the other hand, if you look at the idea that Grierson had concerning documentary film practice, in a curious manner *Handsworth Songs* is quite par for the course, it's inherently traditional, it's crushingly traditional.
- JA:** The montage technique which the film deploys, a shifting narrative that attempts to poeticise certain moments, is quite traditional in thirties British documentary cinema, especially in the works of Humphrey Jennings. In fact, we spent a lot of time watching a number of documentaries like *Industrial Britain*. One of the things which is important to acknowledge is that the mournful angelic quality of certain parts of *Handsworth Songs* has to do with that filmic history; it is to look at industrial Britain and say - "that sort of confidence can't be spoken anymore in the 1980s."

What one is trying to forge is a sense of identity which isn't rooted in an essentialist understanding of one's origin; and to openly acknowledge that there are things about Britain which one finds genuinely moving about its history and its past, especially *vis-à-vis* film-making, which one wants to examine, resuscitate or mourn the passing of. That is an element of the film which hasn't been addressed, which is a shame because it would enrich our discussions.

JP: There seems to be a gap between your attempts to recuperate and radically rework this imagery, and (some) audiences' uncertainty about the kind of intervention you're trying to make. For example, some of your critics have complained that *Handsworth Songs* shows us things which we've all seen before – in other words, it's a typical "race relations" orientated film!

JA: One of the things which I found interesting about the film's reception is the number of people who said this, with comments like: "well, all this visual depiction of burning cars and police on the rampage, we've seen it all before, can't you show us something else about black people? Why should we always be bombarded with these images of black people in trouble, or blacks as victims of racism?" In other words, there is more to life than race. That was precisely the angle which we wanted to foreground – that there isn't more to life, in many ways, and that is the tragedy. Black life in this country does find it difficult to escape race; and when it does in those moments of intimacy, it is always foregrounded by these other possibilities which are not of its making.

RA: A recurring theme in many of the reviews that I've read, is the horrible conflation of different discourses as a way of critiquing the film. Salman Rushdie's review article in *The Guardian*¹ is in my view a perfect example of this conflation, where he foregrounds the experience of the literary imagination during the Harlem Renaissance as an example that Black Audio Film Collective should pursue. He conflates the discourses of literary criticism with the discourses of film criticism, which is very problematic. They do not share the same theoretical terrain, of course, because they are of different grammars and categories. Thus, it appears to me that Rushdie's understanding or knowledge of documentary film and its possibilities is grounded in that discursive field of cinema called documentary realism. He and others have reproduced and deployed those categories of realism as a means of constructing a critique of our work, without for a moment acknowledging that there has been a history of criticism pertaining to realist practices in documentary cinema.

JA: This type of criticism is trying to get us back into precisely the kind of ethnographic area that the film struggles so much to avoid. In the end, what Rushdie and other critics found really objectionable about the film, and some audiences found problematic, is precisely that anti-ethnographic bias – that you can't use the film to construct other knowledges about Handsworth, other than what you already know. Once you have done that, anything else that you get is purely a pro-filmic event. The film doesn't make any pretensions to know where Rastas are at in Birmingham, or where the "unclubbables" hang out *à la* the police report. It seems to me that the missionary zeal with which black life is chased in this anthropological way, is precisely what is missing from *Handsworth Songs*.

PG: You have spoken here and on other occasions about the achievement of intimacy and a whole range of other concepts which are borrowed directly from literary criticism. What do you say in answer to the questions that you can't have it both ways? Because black writers have always found the achievement and validation of those, what you call "moments of intimacy" to be a massive problem, actually, and the ambiguity surrounding the fact that the community on which you rely for the substance of your artistic vision is also experienced by you as a black artist or a black intellectual, as a source of pain and discipline.

RA: Yes, we have had a series of engagements with literary criticism, and I suppose we have borrowed some literary concepts, but that has always been done in context. The context being, of course, the development of black independent film culture – because cinema cannot escape words, it cannot exist outside of language. So when we deploy literary concepts in our work there are specific reasons why they are used, and it is always in conjunction with a particular notion of cinema practice. What has happened is that critics like Salman Rushdie, for example, have uncritically deployed the categories of literary history and criticism without taking into consideration the specificity of cinema history, of the different debates that have taken place in that history. If we were to construct an interlocking space between cinema and literature, then that would be the point of convergence.

THE DEPENDENCY QUESTION

LG: Historically, dependency is a relation that we have inherited. The first point is, what we are doing is no different from a lot of other groups. So why shouldn't black film-makers be allowed to develop artistically and financially in the ways that white British film-makers have been allowed to do, and have enjoyed for many years?

JA: The film and video sector in this country, even in its most vibrant commercial forms, has to be subsidised and nurtured. There is no way, it seems to me, in which British film culture can survive in the glare of Thatcherite enterprise culture, without substantial reformulation of what its aims are and what it hopes to achieve. But I don't think that's a major problem for us. I suspect that out of this film and video sector there will be black film/video groups and workshops which will quite comfortably – with a certain shedding of old political allegiances and commitments – survive in the mainstream by just getting commissions from Channel Four Television and other institutions. I think it's possible that black film and video groups will survive. So the question is whether they will want to survive without all their other commitments – e.g. running film courses and organising screenings – and without the grandiose political ambitions which, some would say, we shouldn't have had anyway.

If black film workshops like ourselves want to survive commercially out of the pale of dependency, there seem to me to be two or three forms in which they can do it. They can go straight down the commercial line and do what everybody else does, i.e. write scripts and send them around the finance corporations and try to get high-powered producers; or they can go to Channel Four and still try to produce their own films with one-off commissions; or they can continue to work in the workshop structure, hoping that there will still be some municipal benevolence left to see them through for a number of years.

The question of dependence is important. Back in 1985, when we participated in the Greater London Council's one-day conference called "Which Way Forward", I think we were one of the few groups who actually mentioned this problem of dependency and the products which come out of that. Now, paradoxically, it seems to me that we have probably gotten away with a lot more under this dependency in terms of experimentation. There is space to make mistakes, but now it's like swapping that rambling incompetence with a gem at the end of it, for a slick outfit which is capable of sustaining products that can justify themselves in the market.

JP: One of the criticisms levelled against the grant-aided workshop sector is that it's a waste of public money. Unfortunately, nobody seems to have come up with any constructive arguments for the existence of the sector, or for why the sector should continue to exist at all.

JA: For us dependency was initially something we craved for on an argument of parity and equality: "white workshops have it, so why shouldn't we have it?" However, once we got it we began to realise that there are a number of problems with it, a number of shortcomings and drawbacks. Whether the Thatcher Government was going in this direction or not may lead to serious questions about whether it is the viable way for black films to survive. I think there is a tension between one's production output and one's extra-production activity such as running courses and screenings. There is a genuine tension there, but it has not been brought about by Thatcherism at all; it's built into the social functions couplet which is part of the workshop declaration – you're supposed to be all things to everybody at once.

The workshop format has been interesting in the sense that it has allowed a series of experiments to take place, production experiments primarily, which could not happen anywhere else. So the question now is whether you want to leave this behind and go somewhere else, where you will be paid better, where you can raise money on the basis of the argument for a product and not have to worry about people telling you (as our funding bodies often do) that you're making too many films, and if you don't stop making so many films we are going to cut your funding! These are clear imperatives which have been set by

this inter-party culture ethos which is forcing everybody to maximise their returns. Those are the external factors which will obviously constrain us in the future; but there are also internal questions about whether or not workshop film practitioners want to stay in this field.

LG: The tragedy is that the possibility for the workshop sector to expand no longer exists. This state of affairs produces various anxieties because the opportunity for young film-makers to organise differently and to produce work collectively is now gone. So we are back to the position where we were, three years ago.

JA: There should be a space for self-examination and re-examination, and it seems to me that if the workshops are a space for that re-examination, then it is becoming more and more limited and it will probably not exist in the next four years. But I think funding bodies will find it very difficult to ostracise workshops like us, because to do that would necessarily imply that all neo-liberal commitments to questions of the dispossessed and the disenfranchised will also be affected. So it's a problem for us, but ultimately I think it is a greater problem for some of those metropolitan socialists.

JP: The changes which are currently taking place within the cultural sector as a whole, will obviously impact heavily on the (black) workshops. The short- to medium-term prospect seems fine, for the moment, but the long-term looks grim.

JA: When the discussion was initiated about the need to establish a black component in the workshop sector, there were a number of film-makers who said "it's a sell-out, black people don't want this kind of thing, we don't want to be put into these little ghettos, we want space to do 'our own things'." What's interesting for me about these early critics is that they are all now in television, largely the BBC. There was a rush to get into television and, as a passing shot, as they all disappeared through the central revolving doors of the BBC, they said to workshops, "why don't you leave this grant-aided stuff and start doing some serious work? Work in the mainstream." Then you realise that they have fantasies of wanting to make big budget features like Stephen Frears and Peter Greenaway. I must admit I don't have those ambitions and fantasies, I don't believe that the risks involved are worth it, I don't think it is worth waiting three years for a half-a-million pounds to make a film, it's crazy.

While the workshop continues to be a viable way forward, of making small-scale, exciting, innovative, experimental, questioning, self-examining films, we shall continue, whilst not forgetting that it can't go on for ever. But the question of an independent black art presence in cinema is both a question for us and for our comrades and allies working in television studios.

Note

1. *The celebrated writer Salman Rushdie's article appeared in **The Guardian** of 12.1.1987 under the title: "Songs doesn't know the score". It was followed up on the paper's letters' page by Stuart Hall (15.1.1987) and Darcus Howe (19.1.1987).*

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