



# Cultural discourses and practices of institutionalised diversity in the UK film sector: ‘Just get something black made’

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**Clive James Nwonka**

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

**Sarita Malik**

College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University London, UK

## Abstract

‘Diversity’ is an evolving dimension of discursive debates within publicly funded parts of the UK media. This article considers how representations of racial diversity in cinema were articulated in a particular moment in recent history. It traces the relationship between the broader New Labour neoliberal agenda of the late 1990s and the UK Film Council’s (UKFC) New Cinema Fund, the key funding mechanism for supporting black British cinema at the time. The authors suggest that the New Cinema Fund’s ‘institutional diversity’ agenda represented a symbolic effort by both the UKFC and UK public service broadcasters to redevelop black British film vis-a-vis a plethora of cultural imperatives oriented around the notion of ‘social inclusion’. The nature of this intervention, it is argued, was strongly influenced by the 1999 Macpherson Report, which identified ‘institutional racism’ within the fabric of the UK’s organisations. The article examines how such an ‘institutional diversity’ agenda emerged within the production context of a BBC Film/UKFC production, *Bullet Boy* (2005), thus generating a rearticulated black British cinema that was deeply imbricated in the highly politicised contexts outlined.

## Keywords

black British, cinema, cultural policy, diversity, film, New Labour, UK

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## Corresponding author:

Clive James Nwonka, London School of Economics and Political Science, 8th Floor, Tower I, Clement’s Inn, London WC2A 2AZ, UK.

Email: [c.j.nwonka@lse.ac.uk](mailto:c.j.nwonka@lse.ac.uk)

## Introduction

In the late 1990s, certain developments within the wider figuration of British politics impacted on the British film industry. This made the entire system of film governance and organisation more complex and to operate increasingly outside previous frameworks of British cinema. A major influence was the emergence of a new commercial structure for British film. The establishment of the UK Film Council (UKFC) in 2000 signalled the intentions of the New Labour government of the time to apply market principles to film production and culture more generally. Within this model, state actors and institutions unified to construct new forms of British cinema that were designed to respond to and be compatible with new commercial realities. Another pillar of this new model was the idea that film possesses distinctive sociocultural effects.

This article analyses the broad parameters of the British film industry's twin agenda (these commercial and sociocultural imperatives), examining how it was executed by the UKFC. The primary focus is the impact of the UKFC's New Cinema Fund on black British filmmaking in order to deepen sociological understandings of race, culture and representation. The New Cinema Fund was established to support British filmmaking of a more cultural orientation and declared a particular commitment to supporting work from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) creative talent in 'working with filmmakers and funding bodies in the regions and nations and those who have been traditionally marginalised or under-represented within the industry' (UK Film Council [UKFC], 2005, p. 7). By analysing how 'diversity in the media' was articulated in a specific moment of UK film history, the article addresses the relationship between market, social and cultural concerns.

## Methodological and theoretical framing

Our analysis maps the historic processes that helped shape a dimension of UK cultural production at the turn of the millennium. It offers a new analysis of one of the creative outputs that was produced in this moment, the 2005 feature film *Bullet Boy*, directed by Saul Dibb. We suggest that *Bullet Boy* exemplifies very well the ways in which policy and wider sociopolitical forces intersect to shape representations of 'race'. In doing so, we aim to add to the current literature on race and cultural production (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013; Malik, 2013a, 2013b; Saha, 2015). Specifically, we point to the significance of the liberal tenets of multiculturalism and diversity principles within this prevailing political context in the early 2000s, and its accompanying belief in the utility of cultural participation as an enabler of social inclusion. It is important to note here that the prevailing socially functional logic in the arts and cultural sector that provides the basis for common social inclusion endeavours is that, if broader sets of cultural and social types participate, then social inclusion will follow. We seek to problematise this neat association between participation and inclusion through a critical cultural analysis supported by empirical research based on interviews conducted with key production personnel involved in the making of *Bullet Boy*.

Within our discussion, we also link the agendas of the New Cinema Fund with the shifting context of public service broadcasting (PSB) at the time, noting the close

relationship between UK PSB television and the UK film sector (Hill, 1999). We chart how the UKFC and BBC Films (as an example of public service broadcasting in the UK) produced a version of institutionalised black British film oriented around this deliberative social inclusion agenda. One critical question is whether these new institutionalised approaches, in the post-Macpherson context that we will go on to examine, actually inaugurated a progressive mode of black British film. Or whether they, in fact, helped produce a fundamental shift away from the organic and authentic origins of black British film culture in the 1980s (Mercer, 1988). By tracing the correlations between the New Cinema Fund and BBC Films that converged in the making of *Bullet Boy*, we interrogate not only how this feature film was conceptualised, produced and communicated, but also the broader political concerns and agendas that framed the film and the circumstances of its production.

Such an analysis of the relationship between the media, race and cultural production, through *Bullet Boy* and post-1997 UK film policy more broadly, facilitates an analysis of the role of the state media in commodifying culture through multiculturalism in contemporary contexts. Beyond what it reveals to us about British film policy, we suggest that the significance of this article lies in its exploration of the cultural policy and cultural production dynamic. Moreover, it adds to the rare literature (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013) linking policy and production contexts with matters of race and representation.

The history of black British cinema has been documented but is still fairly marginalised, both within British film studies and within the sociology of the media more generally. Notable exceptions are the scholarly research that has interrogated the approaches of UK PSB, local governments and cultural institutions in attempting to create fertile industrial conditions for the emergence of black filmmakers through public subsidy legislation in the 1980s (Diawara, 1993; Hill, 1999; Mercer, 1988; Ross, 1996). The establishment (and subsequent demise) of the UKFC and its effect on British cinema has also been a focus in the work of Dickenson and Harvey (2005), Doyle (2014), Doyle Schlesinger, Boyle, and Kelly (2015) and Kelly (2016). There is also a notable set of literature exploring the various contours of the UKFC, including the work of Hill (2012), Wayne (2006) and Newsinger (2012). This article will draw on this body of literature by asking two main questions: first, how did state actors (UKFC and the BBC) adapt to the New Labour cultural decrees; and second, why was culture, and more specifically film, a key focus for the diversity agenda? We present our analysis through the example of *Bullet Boy*, because of what this New Cinema Fund feature reveals about the complex nature of what we identify as the industrial shift from autonomy to instrumentalisation, in accordance with New Labour's broader cultural objectives in this historical phase of UK film. Furthermore, we critically examine some of the taken for granted assumptions about the relationship between the UKFC's New Cinema Fund and black British cinema, which we argue is a key, yet often neglected, area within the various retrospectives of the UKFC (see Doyle, 2014; Schlesinger, 2015).

All of this is designed to understand better the commodification of culture, and thus deepen sociological understanding about the vexed politics that bring together 'race', culture and the creative industries. We examine the discursive politics around the film that signal an intensified commodification of culture. However, our primary argument is based on the role of multicultural – in this case black British urban culture – as the

mechanism through which particular markets are opened out, in order to meet governmental objectives (represented here by the UKFC) pertaining to social inclusion, cultural diversity and to the market. We also use the film as a case in point that highlights how naïve representation is constructed, whilst overlooking the structures of racism that actually exist.

Žižek's (1997) analysis of multicultural capitalism provides us with an early critique of the 'logic of capitalism', which commented at the time on New Labour's full acceptance at the point of their victory in 1997 of what he describes as 'the logic of Capital' (Žižek, 1997, p. 34). His commentary pinpoints the specific nuance that the idea of multiculturalism brings to such capitalist conditions because multiculturalism, according to Žižek, is the 'ideal form of ideology' for global capitalism. Within his analysis, the ideology of multiculturalism is a form of racism in how it '“respects” the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed “authentic” community', necessarily located at a distance from the multiculturalist's 'privileged *empty point of universality*' (Žižek, 1997, p. 44). Žižek brings to our analysis of the production context of *Bullet Boy* important questions around authenticity, cultural difference and market power.

The relationship between the broadcasting industry and the ubiquity of diversity policy can also be usefully located in Adorno's description of the capitalist basis of contemporary culture. Adorno (1991) was one of the first to both identify and critique capitalist modes of cultural production and recognise the cosmopolitan nature of capitalism. Borrowing from Marx the concept of 'use and exchange value', Adorno asserted that cultural products were embedded within capitalist modes of production and distribution, and their ability to attract an audience, considered a commodity in itself in that its value lies in exchange. In the specific case of ethnic minorities, as Saha (2015) suggests, there is an ability to accommodate and recruit difference within the alignments of power, and a heavily coded market is receptive to racialised constructions of black life that sell, that are popular, and provide a form of racialised capitalism that the diversity genre finds its genesis in; one, we suggest, of formulae, verisimilitude and cliché in cultural production. *Bullet Boy*, in this context, sells a certain use value. We will now go on to discuss some of the more specific production contexts that gave rise to the making of *Bullet Boy*.

## Culture, New Labour and the UKFC

In order to understand the establishment and key functions of the UKFC, we need to refer back to the victory of New Labour in May 1997 and the specific ideological shifts the government was now in the process of designing and instituting over the subsequent years. Arts and culture notably became a subject of political interest for the New Labour government, evidenced by a range of national developments that, in turn, influenced cultural policy objectives.

Following the 1997 election victory, New Labour's first Culture Secretary, Chris Smith, announced the 're-branding UK' cultural project, designed to transform its cultural image from a national heritage culture to what was termed 'Cool Britannia'. This marked the monetisation of the UK's creative sector and an increasingly economic dimension in how culture was perceived (Hesmondhalgh, Oakley, Lee, & Nisbett, 2015). Smith stated, 'as a new Government, we have recognised the importance of this whole

industrial sector that no one hitherto conceived of as “industry” (Smith, 1998, p. 26). Film policy became one of the areas in which New Labour immediately intervened upon entering government. In July 1998, the newly rebranded Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (formerly Department for National Heritage) announced its intention to establish a film council for the UK (DCMS, 1998). What was proposed was a UK-wide body, with the chief purpose of ensuring public funds were strategically invested into British film. The UKFC assumed control of the work previously carried out by British Screen Finance, the British Film Commission (BFC), the National Lottery Film Department of the Arts Council of England and the English regional arts associations (Dickenson & Harvey, 2005) with John Woodward, a British Film Institute (BFI) board member and former head of the industry trade organisation PACT (now BECTU), taking on the role of Chief Executive.

The manifesto released at the launch of UKFC in May 2000, *Towards a Sustainable UK Film Industry*, had two overarching aims: first, to develop a sustainable UK film industry and second, to develop film culture in the UK by expanding both film access and education. However, it was also clear that cultural aims were to be sidelined to make way for commercial imperatives. For observers of the UKFC’s formation, key personnel and objectives, it was evident that the interests of mainstream, American orientated directors, producers and distributors and trade interests were being prioritised over public interests, essentially further distancing itself from any notion of a British independent film culture (Wayne, 2006). As Dickenson and Harvey (2005) have noted, of the 13 board members appointed by New Labour, none held any expertise in independent cinema and two of these were members of the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPA) (p. 426). Not everyone was happy with the more commercially minded, business approach to film support and many independent filmmakers were concerned with what materialised as an excessive dependency by the UKFC on inward investment from Hollywood studios. The decision to appoint Alan Parker, the distinguished Hollywood filmmaker and former board member of the BFI, as the UKFC’s first chair seemed portentous. Parker was an outspoken advocate of big budget transatlantic productions and financial partnerships and crucially, as noted by Dickenson and Harvey (2005), ‘a sharp critic of independent or experimental film and of the intellectual and critical work of the British Film Institute’ (p. 426). An underlying aversion to films that were concerned with critically interrogating themes of nationhood was apparent in the new structure and a new emphasis on the monetary value of British film was emerging.

‘Arm’s length’ bodies and quangos can seldom claim conceptual autonomy: their *modus operandi* align them with particular ideological imperatives, making the UKFC ‘an iconic New Labour’ creation (Doyle, 2014, p. 133). Thus, from its inception, the impetus behind the emergence of the UKFC was to adjust the film policies, practices and institutions to conform to the commercial orientations of the Hollywood studio system. The ambiguous concept of ‘sustainability’ was often used to legitimise the subjective interests of a London-centric and transatlantic orientated elite from which the majority, if not all, of the UKFC board members were recruited. The UKFC signalled a shift towards the US film oligopoly and, in turn, an adherence to the broad decrees of New Labour’s economic policies that intended to esteem market forces as the organising principle of film governance. In effect, this hybridisation of British film with the US was

represented as a simple reconfiguring of a national cultural product to harmonise with the economic decrees of the American film apparatus.

In terms of policy transformation, these transnational aspirations coincided with domestic decrees to introduce a number of policy effects within the UKFC agenda. The UKFC had taken ownership of almost all government funded film production, distribution and exhibition, establishing nine Regional Screen Agencies (RSA) geographically located throughout the UK in partnership with larger, commercially orientated Regional Development Agencies. Here, the UKFC attempted to develop a form of state subsidy that could nurture and promote industrial growth as well as further social agendas of cultural value, diversity and equality of opportunity, provided that such societal imperatives did not supersede the overriding economic agendas that we have been outlining. Although the *raison d'être* of the UKFC was to unify the previously diffuse elements of UK film production, it re-emerged as fragmented not only in terms of the agendas and imperatives of its partnering organisations but also through sectionalism within the lead body itself. This latter dimension was partly as a result of the compartmentalisation of National Lottery resources that were distributed by the UKFC through three key funds designed to develop writing, directing and producing for film. These funds were the Development Fund, the Premier Fund (with a budget of £10 million per year and a focus on commercial film) and the New Cinema Fund, which aimed to finance films that could potentially appeal to a broader range of audiences. Led by Paul Trijbits with a budget of £5 million over three years, the objectives of the New Cinema Fund included to:

... ensure equality of opportunity and promote social inclusion and cultural diversity; challenge audiences; broaden the range of films on offer in the UK; and ensure films supported by the Fund are good enough to attain effective distribution and exhibition. (UKFC, 2000, p. 15)

The objectives therefore were manifold, and *Bullet Boy* was to have a particular value for the UKFC in terms of its 'effective distribution and exhibition' potentialities, as well as for 'promoting social inclusion and cultural diversity'. The establishment of a New Cinema Fund and the development of such ecology with a specific aim to back radical and innovative filmmaking 'showed that the new body was also committed to the wider and more culturally based remit surrounding public support for film' (Doyle, 2014, p. 135). The New Cinema Fund did indeed fund a broad range of British films, such as *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), *This Is England* (2006), *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006) and *Fish Tank* (2009) as well as demonstrating, specifically in its co-production frameworks with British television broadcasters, the co-dependency factors involved in the creation of a cultural British cinema (see Andrews, 2014).

Throughout its tenure, the UKFC sought to 'work with broadcasters and other platform operators to improve public access to British and specialist films' (UKFC, 2009, p. 136). By 2005, 17 of the 33 films funded by the New Cinema Fund were co-productions (Doyle et al., 2015) involving broadcaster support. Two of the lead public service broadcasters in the UK, the BBC and Channel 4, contributed funds to New Cinema Fund productions. Malik (2002) has suggested that a key purpose of PSB drama in particular is its distinctive ability to represent and critique contemporary social life and link to issues of national identity. Channel 4, for example, 'played a critical role in boosting

black British film practice and an independent commissioning structure, which broadly speaking, expanded the number of black film and television producers in the 1980s' (p. 156). Television funding in British film permitted, to an extent, the migration of the public service tradition from television to film.

But the arrival of the UKFC also represented a challenge to the public service tradition and, notably, its emergence came at a time when the ideological basis of PSB was itself shifting towards the logic of the market. Specifically at the BBC, it was in the Single Drama Department that such market forces were clearly manifest by the mid-1990s. Under BBC Director General John Birt's *Producer Choice*, single drama 'had absorbed the film industry's orthodoxy, rising budgets, theatrical releases and distribution' (Born, 2005, p. 355) by the end of the decade. For BBC Films head David Thompson, this involved a new emphasis on films with high production values and a crossover appeal that could attract both American co-production finance and distribution (see Brown, 2007; Wayne, 2006). The BBC, now with its own commercial arm, BBC Enterprises Ltd, began to 'reinterpret their distinct "public service" ideals as the need to attract as many cinema goers and, ultimately, television viewers as possible to the films they were hoping to finance' (Malik, 2002, p. 157).

## Macphersonism and the emergence of diversity

What unified BBC Films and the broader New Labour/UKFC agenda for the film industry was its emphasis on neoliberal rationalities in regard to increased budgets and international co-productions. Whilst New Labour's initial aims to develop a social inclusion agenda through culture were articulated most vividly in Chris Smith's 1998 publication, *Creative Britain*, the conclusion of the public inquiry into the 1993 murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence can be seen as a key influence in the concerted efforts to increase the visibility and production of black film and TV within a pervasive climate of post-Macphersonism. The findings of the Macpherson Report, published in 1999, asserted that the Metropolitan Police investigation into the murder was 'marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers' (Sir William Macpherson, 1999, p. 365). Although the report identified 'institutional racism' within the police, the effect was a wider focus on 'institutional racism' in the UK and a range of issues such as racial equality in education and employment were placed on the political agenda. The report helped inform the 2000 Race Relation Amendment Act, which in effect required public bodies to adopt a much more systematic and proactive stance against discrimination and racial inequality in the workplace. Equality Impact Assessments followed, which required all public bodies to 'demonstrate that they are actively combating racism and promoting equality of opportunity and good race relations in all areas of their employment practices and service provision' (Nwonka, 2015, p. 76). These critical developments embodied the fundamental tenets which were to emerge as 'diversity' within the cultural industries.

Whilst the Macpherson Report did not specifically refer to the role that culture and creativity could play in creating racial harmony, one consequence of Macpherson was that strategies for the monetisation of the cultural industries were to intersect with those for social inclusion. Whilst much of the focus of New Labour's social policy was on

urban regeneration in deprived inner-city areas (Atkinson & Helms, 2007), their multi-cultural policies had been focused on diversifying monocultural sectors to promote a socially inclusive culturalism, involving central and local government, community level organisations, mainstream cultural institutions and the creative sector. The question for us here is why culture, and more specifically film, became a key focus for the diversity agenda. Assumptions about the utility of cultural policy in these areas resided in the idea that social exclusion, crime, antisocial behaviour and community deprivation could be remedied through the application of 'culture'. It is against this ideological backdrop of social functionality that we can trace the systemic cultural policy shifts that occurred after Macpherson. This social purpose was highly instrumental in the pervasive post-racial utopia, conveyed through rhetorical and figurative language where 'cultural production would generate employment; deprived communities would be transformed' (Hewison, 2014, p. 8). It also coincided with other developments, including: the Parekh Report (Runnymede Trust, 2000) which had resulted from a two-year inquiry by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain and that revealed that just 0.02% of the first £2 billion of arts subsidy from the National Lottery had been allocated to BAME projects; the incoming 2002 Race Relations Amendment Act; and the Arts Council England (ACE) decreeing that 'all funded arts organisations needed to create a diversity action plan whilst it ring fenced twenty-nine million pounds for black and Asian projects in its second Capital Programme' (Hewison, 2014, p. 84).

Saha (2015) has explored some of the developments in diversity policy within UK public service broadcasting during this period, specifically the unilateral strategies to increase ethnic minority representation within the sector and its effects upon British Asian content makers. Malik's work in this area (2002, 2013b) permits some further critical understandings of the impact of Macpherson. As she suggests, the response to the report imbued 'a surge of proactive responses in favour of cultural diversity in the arts and media (rather than, it should be noted, against racism)' (2002, p. 46). In other words, New Labour extracted the anti-racist element permitting culture to usher in a post-racial appreciation of minority creativity through a Macphersonist 'shibboleth of cultural compensations and euphemisms as the antidote to racism and established institutional racism instead as the problem that needed to be tackled' (Sivanandan, 2008, p. 170). 'Diversity' thus sought to distort systematically the genesis of British racial tensions. Remedying cultural inequality, however, cannot by itself remedy racial inequality, which was the *alpha and omega* of Macpherson's report. A depoliticised modality of anti-racism had therefore re-emerged, through cultural plurality in the arts, literature, theatre and film, allowing 'culture and the celebration of difference to mask the structures of power associated with the production of class and ethnic inequality' (Lentin & Titley, 2011, p. 16). The politics of multiculturalism is, as Stuart Hall noted, quite different from the politics of multiculturalism. Whilst the former describes the characteristics of cultural plurality or unity in social difference, the latter 'references the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multicultural societies throw up' (Hall, 2000, p. 209). For New Labour, these critical developments manifested in a new enthusiasm for difference, compatible with the dominant ideological frameworks of Anthony Giddens' *Third Way* (1998). Whilst Giddens' concept primarily sought to reconcile a commitment to social justice within the dominant modes of

right-wing economic policy, its agenda for multiculturalism under New Labour was to permit the comfortable co-habitation of racial and cultural difference. It moved towards a thin culturalism and towards what we suggest here became a prevailing *genre* of diversity, a version of multicultural politics that in fact evacuates the politics and discussions of power from it. This taxonomy included reconciling cultural institutions with terms such as diversity and social inclusion, both of which were subject to considerable contestation and difficult to evaluate. These ideological functions help us to assess how particular concepts came to populate, at least rhetorically, the cultural strategies of the UKFC.

## The New Cinema Fund and black British film

The historical mapping presented here suggests that the UKFC and PSB together emerged as a cornerstone of the social inclusion imperative at the centre of New Labour's film policy. This signalled a wider ubiquity of 'diversity' discourse within the broader political agenda. As argued by Nwonka (2015), the UKFC was also established at a point in British cinema where black filmmakers, characters and narrative themes were notable only for their absence. Indeed, support for black and Asian film during the 1990s remained a neglected issue in the British film ecology (see Alexander, 2000; Arnold & Wambu, 1999; Korte & Sternberg, 2003). This was despite the symbolic attention paid to its under-representation by key institutional bodies including the BFI, British Screen Finance and Channel 4. In the wake of the Macpherson Report, the UKFC, as a public body, needed to mesh together its strategies for the commercialisation of British film with a cultural diversity imperative.

For the UKFC, this moment is significant for how the diversity imperative comes to fashion the relationship between film and cultural identity. Of the 13 objectives the DCMS decreed for the UKFC, two were of particular importance to black filmmakers: 'Support innovative film-making to develop film culture and encourage creative excellence and nurture new talent', and 'Support and encourage cultural diversity and social inclusiveness' (UKFC, 2000, p. 10). 'Cultural diversity' and 'inclusiveness' had now entered the film industry lexicon, encoding such language in what Dick Hebdige has described as 'the phantom history of race relations' (1979, p. 42). These terms reflect, we suggest, a particular liberal fantasy, seeking to reshape a modality of multiculturalism through notions of social functionalism. As Lentin and Titley explain, multiculturalism 'allows culture and the celebration of difference to mask the structures of power associated with the production of class and ethnic inequality' (2011, p. 16).

Within this permissive language, it was perhaps inevitable that there would be a sense of expectancy amongst black and ethnic minority filmmakers about the future of black British film culture, something that is apparent in the interviews conducted and that we reference here. Parminder Vir, who sat on the UKFC board, insisted that the UKFC's New Cinema Fund 'would be crucial in supporting the future of black British film' (in Malik, 2002, p. 170). The UKFC's five board members, Alan Parker, Stuart Till, Tim Bevan, Paul Webster and Vir, had taken the diversity agenda into the UKFC Executive Office with a promise to mainstream black film talent and ensure at least two black officers within the Diversity Sub-Committee in the New Cinema Fund. In late 2000, out of a proposal Vir had written for the UKFC board, the Leadership on Diversity in Film Group

emerged, which in turn resulted in the appointment of a UKFC Diversity Officer, Marcia Williams.

The consensus that emerged from the UKFC's Diversity Action Group (DAG) was that there was little need for an essentialised funding strand for minority groups as these opportunities could be found within the New Cinema and Development funds. Notable on the DAG were Tim Bevan, chair of the Leadership on Diversity in Film Group, and also co-chair of Working Title Films, 'undoubtedly a commercially successful film production company, but not one noted for its contribution to diversity in British cinema' (Newsinger, 2012, p. 142). Meanwhile, Parminder Vir, who as former Diversity Adviser at Carlton Television and organiser of the Black Film Festival in 1981 whilst she was Head of the Ethnic Arts Unit at the Greater London Council, had strong credentials for helping develop black British film in the UK.

There was, however, a clear discrepancy between the promises of the development of black cinema within the UKFC and the actual allocation of UKFC resources to this. Commissioned by the UKFC, Bhavnani (2007) produced a critical analysis of the diversity agenda in the *Barriers to Diversity* report, arguing, amongst other things, that minority ethnic groups had difficulties in accessing funds for feature film development and production, rendering unproductive the numerous schemes put in place by the UKFC. Between 2001 and 2007, just 4% of the 106 awards provided through the UKFC's New Cinema Fund and 8% of the 409 Development Fund awards went to minority ethnic individuals and groups. One project that did succeed in such circumstances was *Bullet Boy*. Given the salient contexts that we are describing, the film serves as a useful exemplar of the utilisation and instrumentalisation of film culture that the New Cinema Fund's approach to the question of black British film produced.

### **The 'Community Project' – *Bullet Boy* as a product of institutional diversity**

In the late 1990s, BBC Head of Drama, Ruth Caleb, devised a method of producing high quality drama very cost-effectively (as a result of departmental cuts at the BBC). For example, documentary filmmakers were commissioned to make their first features using a skeleton crew of around 10 as opposed to around 20. The presence of *Producer Choice* (the controversial system established by BBC Director General John Birt in 1991 decreeing that each part of the BBC would be run as a profit-and-loss operation) within the Single Drama Department relieved the pressure to privatise the BBC from the Conservative government in the 1990s by the existence of an internal market. However, this did not always mean the BBC would simply support the theatrical release of all its single dramas. Caleb would finance television films and send them to film festivals that accepted terrestrial features. Provided the film had gained critical acclaim, she would propose it to BBC Single Drama as a theatrical release. The first output using this approach was *Last Resort* (2000, dir. Pawel Pawlikowski) with a production budget of £300,000 and a crew of just 10.

At the time of the UKFC's establishment, Paul Hamann (BBC Head of Documentary) and Michael Tait (BBC Development Executive for Documentaries) had a project in embryonic stages, which suited such a mode of production. The creative force behind

*Bullet Boy* (at this time titled *The Boys*) was the documentary maker Saul Dibb, and *Bullet Boy* would be his first feature film. Its title was inspired by a headline in a local London newspaper, *Hackney Gazette*, which reported a local gun related incident. The plotline of Dibb's protagonist Ricky (Ashley Walters), a black male forced to choose between a criminalised loyalty and a swift return to prison, 'embodies the familiar hegemonies of black British youth identity' (Nwonka, 2017, p. 72). It was subsequently sold to its backers at BBC Films as 'Kes with guns' (quoted in *The Guardian*, 20 April 2005). The tagline denotes a politics of racism that is as much about the colouring of the imagination as it is about the physicality of black skin; one that plays into racialised pathologies, linking black urban masculinity and racialised danger (Malik & Nwonka, 2017). Although all of Caleb's previous work had drawn on improvisation, a scene-by-scene outline was worked through with screenwriter Catherine Johnson, previously a writer-in-residence to young offenders at Holloway Prison. Further, the actors recruited for the production brought their own experiences into its characterisation, particularly Ashley Walters, who was cast on the basis of his performance in the BBC urban drama *Storm Damage* (dir. Simon Cellan Jones, 2000). However, the casting of Walters was equally determined by what he signified culturally: here, a particular view of black British youth shaped by his activities beyond the screen, notably his association with South London garage music collective So Solid Crew and his imprisonment for firearm possession.

*Bullet Boy* was initially a television drama. On identifying its potential as a cinematic film, a production budget of £700,000 was raised through BBC Films and Shine Independent Group. Given the decrees of the UKFC and the rather lofty claims made by the Diversity Action Group, there was a certain urgency amongst both the BBC and the UKFC to 'just get something black made' (anonymous interview with the author, 2013). The idea of 'something black' getting made is interesting, signalling both the urgency (the film was made within just two years) but also the notion that culturally there is such a thing. Notably, another feature production at the time, *A Way of Life* (dir. Asama Asante, 2004) also received funding from the New Cinema Fund and was made by a black director, but its subject matter was not framed around the lives of Britain's BAME community. A review of *Bullet Boy*'s promotional material suggests that the film's 'blackness' was utilised by BBC Films to establish the film's 'generic corpus' (Neale, 2000), aiming to 'create the human emotion of *Kes*, the iconic social power of *Made in Britain*, and the relevance and compassion of *Last Resort*' (BBC Films, 2002). The proposal submitted to the UKFC New Cinema Fund in 2002 by BBC Films and Luke Alkin from Shine reveals the production team tapping into what Neale describes as 'cultural verisimilitude' (2000), a generic approach that pertains to dominant ideological discourse, in that it adheres to what is believed to be a true reflection of its subject matter. Here, the BBC Films summary is especially salient:

BULLET BOY is London slang for the children of 11–12 for whom, in certain parts of London, guns have become a way of life. They form the youngest strata of a British urban culture that has spawned headline after headline. Their world is deadly, ruthless wild and dramatic. As the violence continues to explode onto the streets, the powerful human tragedies that lie behind each incident remain obscure. This film will tell one story. ... Over the last few years gunshots

have become an everyday occurrence in the capital, notoriously but not exclusively amongst the black community: feuds once solved by fists or knives are now settled by bullets. The drug economy has subverted mainstream morality – even the restraining framework of the black churches – providing an alternative system of validation. In Britain’s version of ghettos, British-born black kids move in rival crews and posses, jostling to distribute the steady flow of cocaine from mules off the flights from Kingston. (BBC Films, 2002)

This summary of the film is, we suggest, interwoven with pathological constructions of blackness (Gilroy, 1981, 1987) that demonstrate the power and endurance of racialised imagery that is reproduced within (cultural) institutional spaces. The sociological details of the tenets of gang life and what Dick Hobbs describes as ‘unlicensed capitalism’ (2013) fall completely out of the frame. Here, the storyline conforms to normative social expectations of the particular social milieu – the dominant ideological discourses (Neale, 2000). One critical question is to whom is it believable, imaginable and recognisable? If the text is imaginable to an already racialised audience, it will be popular; in this context it reproduces dominant associations between race and crime in the social imaginary, alongside an equally toxic legacy of racist characterisation. However, despite the claims presented through its narrative image, *Bullet Boy* is not, we suggest, a film about social analysis because it produces no real enquiry of social situations. This is not to diminish the presence of ‘real’ intra-race violence, but the film itself offers a characterisation that is part of a long disreputable history of moral panics about racialised violence and masculinity (Hall, 1978). In any case, this is not a critique of the film’s ‘inaccurate’ portrayal of blackness, but rather that it provides a suitable explanation for the ideological problematics that emerge through an understanding of its production strategies.

In return for the £700,00 contribution from the New Cinema Fund to *Bullet Boy*’s overall £2 million budget, the UKFC logo features prominently on the film’s opening credit sequences and in their promotional material. The combined input of BBC Films and the UKFC in *Bullet Boy* also provided, at the time, an urgent cultural validity to their collective brand image as the avatar of cultural diversity through film. *Bullet Boy*, which could be described as an anomaly in the traditional BBC Films repertoire during this period, oriented towards a youthful black audience and clearly adhered to broader agendas of diversity, representations of otherwise under-represented ethnic minority groups and, significantly, social inclusion. Further, in keeping with the diversity ideals, the UKFC recruited Marc Boothe, a London based black producer who had benefited from the UKFC’s Film Training Fund with a budget of £1 million pounds a year, to ‘support training for scriptwriters and development executives, and separately to train business executives, producers and distributors’ (UKFC, 2000). Boothe, who would later produce the UKFC’s Blank Slate short film scheme aimed at BAME filmmakers and described by one producer as ‘their diversity guy’ (anonymous interview with author, 2013), had never produced a feature film before, but the insistence by Boothe on having a black crew supported the diversity agenda for the film. As Caleb recalls, ‘If you go out on any film crew, you might see the occasional black face, but here, apart from a fantastic Dutch Director of Photography (Marcel Zyskind) sound, costume, makeup, and at one point catering was all black’ (Caleb, interview with author, 12 May 2015). *Bullet Boy* is therefore significant when we understand the politics at work because its entire production

apparatus was particularly conducive to the socially functionalist and culturally inclusive aims of the BBC, UKFC and the New Cinema Fund.

Returning to the idea of *Bullet Boy* selling a certain ‘use value’, a notion that Adorno helps to explicate in his work, it was clear how this was operating for the cultural agencies involved. Both the UKFC and Shine had wanted film distribution rights, whilst the BBC ‘were not that fussed’ (Caleb, interview with author, 12 May 2015). All New Cinema Fund applicants were to include a global festival strategy, considered as a key method for low budget films to gain critical acclaim and penetrate the international market (UKFC, 2009). Verve, who handled the film’s distribution, felt that given its title, ensemble black cast and subject matter it had a chance of crossover from art house into the mainstream. Indeed, *Bullet Boy* was selected for the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival and won a Hitchcock d’Or at the 2005 Dinard Festival of British Film. However, despite playing to 75 UK screens and a promotional strategy targeting predominantly black orientated media outlets, the £300,000 recouped at the UK box office was not the crossover anticipated either by the BBC or the UKFC, and the film failed to find distribution in any other territory.

However, we can also locate its instrumentalist ideals in the way the film was offered to sections of the black population. Prior to its completion at the end of 2004, the film, which had been categorised as a ‘community project’ in a co-production meeting just prior to completion, had its title changed from *The Boys* to the more sensationalist *Bullet Boy*. The production team then decided to assemble a number of local residents to view the film at a special screening at the London Borough of Hackney’s Rio Cinema in March 2005. It was here that the film first drew intense criticism from members of the audience for contributing to the problematisation of the black British community in the British media. As Ruth Caleb recalls:

At a screening of *Bullet Boy* with myself, Mark [Boothe] and Saul [Dibb], a black man in the audience accused the ‘white team’ apart from Mark [Boothe] who was described as ‘the token black’ of trying to make something with a specifically black culture. Then he made some reference to me, which I could not hear, so I smiled benignly, but then he called me a ‘BBC lackey housewife’. (Interview with the author, 12 May 2015)

Herein lies the thin façade of the diversity genre – which we suggest highlights its disingenuity, not because of the ‘white team’ in this case, but because of a lack of commitment to a genuinely dialogical form of cultural production. The *Bullet Boy* case also points to a naivety in how cultural institutions can construct cultural practices and narratives, overlooking that black British cinema actually has its roots in an extremely rich and powerful visual and oral tradition 1970s and 1980s Britain, made visible through an independent film sector that was politically aligned and responsive to black communities. In such a screening, comprising of local residents, the film is presented as an authentic black cultural product under the visage of multiculturalism, with *Bullet Boy* under its PSB guise becoming a tool of community ontology, and points to the locus of how and what cultural institutions often perceive and imagine black communities to be.

There remains little foundation for arguing that the New Cinema Fund, given its rhetorical emphasis on its commitment to developing a black British film culture, achieved

the changes it promised. Rather, with its strong diversity emphasis, it can be considered as part of the dominant ideological frameworks of the UKFC, shaped by the emergent financially orientated turn in the UK screen industries. It is an example of a socially ambiguous project presented as ‘new’ black cinema. As Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013) remind us, ‘cultural production often seeks to disseminate, incorporate, and commodify vital forms of culture from the margins of societies. Combined with racialised understandings of talent and authenticity, this can have powerful effects on cultural production’ (p. 180). The UKFC’s cultural vision, which underpinned its social inclusion agenda, comes into question in this context. Returning to Žižek’s critique of multicultural capitalism, we can understand such a vision as deeply tied to the logic of capital because it is perfectly possible to fight for cultural differences ‘which leave the basic homogeneity of the capitalist world-system intact’ (Žižek, 1997, p. 46).

Another key difference from the early tradition of black British cinema (supported by organisations such as the Greater London Council and early Channel 4) was that the UKFC demanded commercial returns on investment (ROI). Resources within the New Cinema Fund were managed by fund managers and not by cultural committees, via a system of commissioning editors. In effect, public servants applied a studio system structure and, significantly for our wider argument about the commercial orientation of this new mode of film governance, economic value was now being assigned to a cultural product not previously considered primarily in economic terms. For example, we can note the UKFCs ‘commercially aggressive attitude’ to British producers in fixing recoupment on the New Cinema Fund films at 25% (Doyle et al., 2015, p. 98) despite the fact that the New Cinema Fund ‘did not operate with the same commercial expectations as the Premiere Fund’ (Hill, 2012, p. 341). Furthermore, given that ‘black films’ (of any definition) seldom return on investment – with only *Adulthood* (dir. Noel Clarke, 2008) often considered the *ne plus ultra* of urban film, achieving the rare combination of critical acclaim and commercial success – National Lottery resources were not used in an innovative or risk taking way. From the perspective of developing black British cinema, this was a major failure. This is not to suggest that the cultural value of film was reduced to a simple question of commercial viability and financial recoupment, but that such demands may well have stymied the production of a greater body of black British films at the time and subsequently.

## Conclusion

As we draw to a conclusion, we want to suggest that social inclusion strategies and policies are beset with irresolvable tensions that arise from attempting to amalgamate neoliberal economic policies with cultural approaches. As Newsinger observes, ‘as in New Labour cultural policy more generally, the UKFC was unable to make a case for “diversity” that was not based on commercial criteria, as opposed to a moral or political argument’ (2012, p. 142). The *modus operandi* of the UKFC reveals the cutting edge neoliberalism that formed the axis on which the organisation was established and operated. Here, market fundamentalism liberates public subsidy from any responsibility to really develop black cinema, and within such market-based modes of rationality, the

New Cinema Fund, working with loose metaphors such as ‘social inclusion’, failed to extend the accessibility of and represent the true potential of black British film.

This article has identified the genetic origin of the Macpherson legacy within the UKFC’s New Cinema Fund in its approach to black British film. We can identify *Bullet Boy* as the touchstone of the New Cinema Fund’s diversity discourse because it set the instrumentalist template for much of what would later purport to be British ‘urban film’; a prevailing narrative trope through which the black British experience has been narrated in contemporary culture (Malik & Nwonka, 2017). *Bullet Boy* exemplifies the uncontested belief in black film as a social enabler, broadly articulated via instrumentalist purposes, which others such as Malik (2013b) and Hewison (2014) have identified as a key characteristic in much of New Labour’s approach to the development of diversity. *Bullet Boy* is a New Labour imbued project, mechanised by the UKFC, within the context of post-Macpherson. It contrasts with earlier models of 1980s black film specifically designed to liberate distinctive cultural film production from the forces of the market, thus creating a platform for the cultivation of a film culture that was both autonomous and extra-commercial. The UKFC’s New Cinema Fund, by reversing that trajectory, provided a cultural film agenda, which did not actually provide protection from the market through *additionality* (in this context, subsidising what the market does not produce). Furthermore, it emerged with a heavy reliance on a utilitist discourse which, perhaps paradoxically, was obscured, but perpetually promised and assumed throughout much of the UKFC period that we have examined.

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