Black Film British Cinema II

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Edited by
Clive Nwonka and Anamik Saha

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Contributors

Bidisha is a broadcaster, writer, and filmmaker. She specialises in human rights, social justice, gender, and the arts and offers political analysis, arts critique, and cultural diplomacy, tying these interests together. She writes for *The Guardian* and *The Observer* (where she is currently an arts critic) and for BBC TV and radio, Channel 4 News, and Sky News. Her fifth book, *Asylum and Exile: Hidden Voices of London* (Seagull Books, 2015), is based on her outreach work in UK refugee charities and detention centres. Her first film, *An Impossible Poison* (2017), has been highly critically acclaimed and selected for numerous international film festivals.

Erica Carter is Professor of German and Film at King's College London, and Chair of the UK German Screen Studies Network. She began her academic career at the University of Birmingham, working across German and Cultural Studies, the latter at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. She took time out of the academy in the mid-1980s to co-found, with Chris Turner, the translation cooperative Material Word. Following two subsequent years as Director of Talks at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London, Erica returned to academic life in 1989, with posts at the University of Southampton (1989–95), the University of Warwick (1995–2011), and King's College London (2011–present).

Ashley Clark is Senior Repertory and Specialty Film Programmer at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). He has curated series at MoMA, New York, BFI Southbank, London, and BAMcinématek. Ashley writes about film and culture for *The Guardian*, *VICE*, *Film Comment*, and *Sight & Sound*, among others, and he is a regular guest critic on BBC TV's Film show. His first book is *Facing Blackness: Media and Minstrelsy in Spike Lee's Bamboozled* (The Critical Press, 2015).

Shelley Cobb is Associate Professor of Film at the University of Southampton and was Principal Investigator of the research project, Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary Film Culture in the UK. She is the author of *Adaptation, Authorship and Cotemporary Women Filmmakers* (Palgrave, 2015) and co-editor of *First Comes Love: Power Couples, Celebrity Kinship and Cultural Politics* (Bloomsbury, 2015). Her most recent publications are on gender, diversity, and data in the film industry and the use of oral histories for contemporary cinema studies. Currently she is writing about the role of celebrities in media discourses about equality and diversity.

James Harvey is Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on the politics of contemporary art cinema, artists' film, and documentary. He is the author of *Jacques Ranciere and the Politics of Art Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018) and the editor of *Nationalism in Contemporary Western European Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). He is currently writing the first monograph devoted to the career of British-Ghanaian artist-filmmaker, John Akomfrah.

Melanie Hoyes is Industry Inclusion Executive at the British Film Institute, working on a project to acquire diversity data about gender and ethnicity for the BFI Filmography, telling stories about UK film history using data from the archive. She continues to use data and research in order to monitor and inform improved policy and practice at the BFI and the UK film industry. She completed a BA in Film and Literature at the University of Warwick and an MA in the History of Film and Visual Media at Birkbeck College, University of London. Before joining the BFI she taught undergraduates in Film, Media, and Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex, as well as working in Library Services at UCL.

Maryam Jameela researches film and trauma in relation to Islamophobia. Her work focuses on researching across disciplines in order to sharpen tools of anti-racist resistance. She completed her PhD at University of Sheffield.

Kara Keeling is Associate Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at The University of Chicago. Keeling is author of *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press, 2019) and *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007) and co-editor (with Josh Kun) of *Sound*

Clash: Listening to American Studies (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), and (with Colin MacCabe and Cornel West) a selection of writings by the late James A. Snead entitled *European Pedigrees/ African Contagions: Racist Traces and Other Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Ozlem Koksal is Senior lecturer at the University of Westminster School of Media Arts and Design. Her research focuses on representations of the past, as well as the notions of memory, loss, and displacement in visual culture. She is the author of *Aesthetics of Displacement: Turkey and its Minorities on Screen* (Bloomsbury, 2016). Her other publications include 'Past Not-So-Perfect: Ararat and its Reception in Turkey' in *Cinema Journal* (54.1, 2014) and 'From Wim Wender's Lisbon to Fatih Akin's Istanbul' in *Cool Istanbul: Urban Enclosures and Resistances* (Transcript Verlag, 2015).

Rabz Lansiquot is a filmmaker, writer, curator, and DJ. She was a leading member of sorryyoufeeluncomfortable (SYFU) from 2014–18, and currently works with Imani Robinson as the curatorial and artistic collective Languid Hands, who are the Cubitt Curatorial Fellows for 2020–21. Rabz was Curator In Residence at LUX Moving Image in 2019, developing a programme around Black liberatory cinema. She was a programme adviser for LFF's Experimenta strand in 2019, and is on the selection committee for Sheffield Doc/ Fest 2020. She is also training to deliver Super 8 workshops at not. nowhere and is a board member at City Projects.

Sarita Malik is Professor of Media, Culture, and Communications at Brunel University London. Her research explores issues of social change, inequality, communities, and cultural representation. Sarita is currently leading 'Creative Interruptions', a large international research project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The project examines how the arts, media, and creativity are used to challenge marginalisation. Her books include: *Representing Black Britain* (Sage, 2002), *Adjusting the Contrast: British Television and Constructs of Race* (Manchester University Press, 2017) and *Community Filmmaking: Diversity, Practices and Places* (Routledge, 2017).

Richard Martin is Curator of Public Programmes at Tate, Tutor at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and writes on contemporary art and film for a range of publications. He previously taught literature, film, visual culture, and critical theory at King's College London,

Middlesex University and Birkbeck, University of London. He is the author of *The Architecture of David Lynch* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He holds a BA in English and American Studies from the University of Manchester, an MA in English from University College London, and completed his PhD in Cultural Studies at the London Consortium, a multi-disciplinary programme partnering Birkbeck with the Architectural Association, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Science Museum, and Tate.

So Mayer is a writer, programmer and activist whose recent books include *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (I.B. Tauris, 2015) and *From Rape to Resistance: Taking Back the Screen* (Verso Books, 2017); recent scholarship includes essays on Julie Dash's 'Four Women' in *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image* (Bloomsbury, 2019), and on Tracey Moffatt's 'Moodeijt Yorgas' in *Female Authorship and the Documentary Image* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018). A BFI Film Classics on ORLANDO is forthcoming. They are a regular contributor to *Sight & Sound, Literal and Film Quarterly*; programme with queer feminist film curation collective Club des Femmes, and with Queer Lisboa/Porto; and co-founded Raising Films, a campaign and community for parents and carers in the screen sector.

Clive James Nwonka is a Fellow in Film Studies in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His work explores issues of realism, race, class, and representation in British and American cinema, and the institutional frameworks of the British film and TV industries. His published research includes writings on contemporary social realism, Black British cinema, film and architecture, and diversity policy. He is the author of the forthcoming book, *Black Boys: The Aesthetics of British Urban Cinema* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

Alessandra Raengo is Associate Professor of Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University, founder and coordinator of *liquid blackness*, a research project on blackness and aesthetics, and Founding Editor of its journal, now with Duke University Press. She is the author of *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Dartmouth College Press, 2013) and of *Critical Race Theory and* Bamboozled (Bloomsbury Press, 2016). Her work has appeared in *Camera Obscura*, *Discourse, Adaptation*, *The World Picture Journal*, *Black Camera*, *The Black*

Scholar, and several anthologies. She is working on a book tentatively titled, *Liquid Blackness: Gathering the Aesthetic*.

Richard T. Rodríguez is Associate Professor of Media & Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside. The author of *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 2009), he is at work on two book projects: *Undocumented Desires: Fantasies of Latino Male Sexuality* and *Latino/UK: Transatlantic Intimacies in Post-Punk Cultures*.

Anamik Saha is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London. His research interests are in race and the media, with a particular focus on cultural production and the cultural industries, including issues of 'diversity'. He is the author of *Race and the Cultural Industries* (Polity, 2018). In 2019 he received an Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow grant for a project entitled 'Rethinking Diversity in Publishing'. Anamik is an editor of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. He is currently working on a new book entitled *Race, Culture, Media* (Sage, 2021).

Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen is a doctoral candidate of media, race, and representation at the Department of Politics and Society, at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her work explores practices of representation of various minoritised groups in the production of Danish film and in Danish film policy, minority taxation in the Danish academy and racialisation.

Natalie Wreyford is currently Research Fellow on A Vision for Women in VR (VWVR.org) in partnership with the University of Nottingham and King's College London. The project is funded by Refiguring Innovation in Games (ReFiG), itself a five-year project supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Natalie writes about gender and creative labour and is author of *Gender Inequality in Screenwriting Work* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Preface

Erica Carter

On 2 February 2019, the Stuart Hall Foundation, launched at the British Film Institute in September 2015 to carry forward the critical and creative work of Britain's foremost post-war black intellectual, ran its second Annual Public Conversation in Conway Hall, London. Taking as its theme 'Stuart Hall and the Future of Public Space', the event included presentations by Farzana Khan, curator of the Foundation's Black Cultural Activism Map; *Novara Media* editor Ash Sarkar and *The Guardian* journalist John Harris, speaking on media interventions in times of crisis; the Foundation's then Executive Director Hammad Nasar; and Stuart Hall Scholar Ruth Ramsden-Karelse, speaking on her PhD research on South African queer feminine gender performance, funded during a first programme of support for new research 'resonant with' the Foundation's aims (Stuart Hall Foundation, 2020).

Like the Conway Hall speakers, this present volume seeks to prompt a public conversation that engages, historicises, and remediates black cultural production – in this volume's case, black British cinema. One panel at the February 2019 event stands out for its especially pertinent address to *Black Film British Cinema II*. An absorbing conversation on the Conway Hall platform between photographer and video artist Willie Doherty and curator Elvira Dyangani Ose revealed a mutual commitment to art that imagines shared senses of postcolonial place and mutual belonging. Doherty's landscape photographs return repeatedly to his home territory of Derry in Northern Ireland, tracing borders marked by histories of sectarian, colonial, and British state violence – as in his *Border Road* (1991), a bleak image of a road to nowhere, with the viewer's visual access to a green horizon barred by concrete road blocks in the image's foreground.

This and other photographs by Doherty from the 1980s and early 1990s capture in poignant visual metaphors the capacity of geopolitical and physical borders to foster violence and rupture communal lives.

But in a later work by Doherty, *The Road Ahead* (1997), the motif of the road signals a different possibility. Shot during the negotiations over what would become the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – the cross-border accord under whose terms military checkpoints were dismantled, paramilitary arms decommissioned, and North-South connectivities slowly re-formed – the road now opens to a new horizon, pointing to a distant city (Derry) whose flushed skies and glittering lights occupy an ambivalent temporality: this could conceivably be a twilight, but the sky's blush pink points also, and contradictorily, to an approaching dawn.

The road in Doherty's landscape photographs might be read as a metaphor for the cultural labour performed both by the Stuart Hall Foundation, and by this volume. The Foundation's website uses a spatial term – the national cultural 'landscape' – to signal both the organisation's alertness to the racialised borders whose analysis was central to Hall's work, and its commitment to dismantling nationalist, nativist, and racist frontiers by forging 'global connections', in particular amongst 'black and brown students, activists and artists' (ibid.). Doherty's Derry 'road ahead' finds its operative equivalent here in lines of connection that break through cultural and institutional blockades, generating a partnership network that spans arts organisations, trusts and foundations, universities and research institutes, as well as private donors who work to develop with the Foundation its expanding programme of fellowships, scholarships, residencies, and public events.

But Doherty's road images also provide a visual frame for this present volume. Like the Foundation, *Black Film British Cinema II* uses the work of the late Stuart Hall as one key nodal point within a larger map of interconnected conversations across cultural, socio-economic, political, and institutional divides. The multilogue began in 1988, when Hall gave what was to become a foundational talk, 'New Ethnicities', at the first ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) conference on Black Film and British Cinema. New Ethnicities' offered an influential reformulation of the 1980s politics of race. Hall used here a discussion of the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe to show how black bodies are traversed not only by divisions and hierarchies of racial difference, but also by sexual, class, and gender difference – so a critical understanding of straight masculinity, for instance, is as crucial to unlocking Mapplethorpe's images as is an awareness of their address to questions to blackness and the racialised body.

Despite the persistence in Thatcher's Britain of a dualistic race politics organised around violently policed black-white boundaries,

Hall perceives, then, in a black artist's exploration of sexual and gender differentiations within racialised discourses of difference the need for a new theorisation (what he terms a 'non-coercive and more diverse conception of ethnicity'), but also a new 'politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity' (Hall, 1988: 29). Thirty years on, Hall's observations appear characteristically prescient. The multiplication of categories of difference has emerged in the intervening three decades as a characteristic of neoliberal cultural economies in which Hall's 'diversity' is commodified and recast conceptually and economically as market segmentation. Yet what Hall terms a politics of representation organised around multiple differences has also been an energising force fuelling twenty-first-century intersectional politics. In her foundational article on intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw, writing one year after 'New Ethnicities', echoes Hall in her critique of a 'single-axis' politics of race, as well as her call to 're-center' the 'politics of discrimination' at the border on which multiple differences meet (Crenshaw, 1989: 167). In a tantalising conclusion, Crenshaw makes observations that further illuminate the connections between this present volume, and the work of cognate black, brown, and intersectional cultural projects, including the Stuart Hall Foundation.

Crenshaw's call is for a 'language' that 'provides some basis for unifying activity' (ibid.). That call was already answered from within black British Cinema when the ICA published a 1988 Document featuring Hall's speech, with a contextualising introduction on 'reframing narratives of race and nation' by Kobena Mercer, and further contributions from cultural theorists and critics Paul Gilroy and James Snead, curators Coco Fusco and June Givanni, journalist and academic Judith Williamson, British Film Institute Head of Production Colin McCabe, and Channel 4 commissioning editor Alan Fountain. The Document's multi-disciplinarity, its transnationalism (Snead worked in the US, Fusco in Cuba), and its inclusion of a dossier of reviews and interviews, created a forum in which multiple voices contributed to crafting a discursive framework (Crenshaw's 'unifying … language') for the critical, theoretical, and historical appraisal of black British film.

Black Film British Cinema II is similarly capacious, creating space for activists, academics, writers, curators, and industry researchers to address together what Sarita Malik terms below the 'impasse' of diversity discourse in a still perniciously racialised 'creative economy'. The collection builds on work begun three decades ago to construct for black British cinema what the theorist Christian Metz once termed 'cinema's third machine' (Metz, 1982). Here, the apparatus

of cinematic writing that is film's conduit into public discourse as well as the source of its embedding in social networks (see Casetti, 2015). In 1988, I was privileged to witness that project of discursive production at work when, during a two-year stint as ICA Director of Talks, I worked alongside Kobena Mercer to organise the first *Black Film British Cinema* conference and publish the proceedings as ICA Documents 7. The 1988 Document was an important milestone in attempts made within and beyond the ICA to find a language (visual, audiovisual, conceptual) that might envision, in the manner both of Crenshaw's unifying discourse, and of Doherty's photographs, open roads to possible futures. But the Document was also a precarious marker of that late 1980s moment, published in an *ad hoc* series and with a limited print run, distributed through fragile artist and filmmaker networks, and largely unavailable since the 1980s until its rescue by Clive James Nwonka and Anamik Saha, who have worked with the ICA to digitise the 1988 document and make it available for readers now (Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2017).

With *Black Film British Cinema II*, editors Nwonka and Saha have also produced what promises to be a fulcrum for a forging of new connections across blockaded roads. Those connections will depend, as the chapters in this volume show, on activities beyond the critical and theoretical writing that is the mainstay of film journalism and scholarship. Metz's machine metaphor for film writing breaks down at the point where criticism and theory meet the activist or counter-cinematic practice encountered in this book. Traced in this volume are the outlines of a contemporary black British film culture that finds (often precarious) shelter in fluid local, regional, national, and transnational networks of knowledge production, political activism, and creative labour. Taking a final cue from Willie Doherty, as well as from Sarita Malik and others on situated writing and the 'locations of film culture', we might in this context usefully spatialise and historicise Metz's discursive account, tracing the emergence of this present volume's cinematic 'third machine' across key interconnected sites of institutional and activist intellectual and creative production (Gudrun, Oliver, and Vinzenz, 2011). These would certainly include – alongside the ICA – Goldsmiths, University of London, the location of day one of the Nwonka and Saha's 2018 conference, the publishing house for *Black Film British Cinema II*, and a key site for further black cultural initiatives including (to select just a handful of numerous possible examples) a partnership with the Stuart Hall Foundation; a women of colour artists' reading group, the Women of Colour Index; and a recently launched MA

in Black British History. Contributors below pinpoint further nodal points in this transnational network: galleries, bookshops, archives (foremost among them June Givanni's Pan African Cinema Archive), research networks, screen studies departments, digital platforms, and networks, as well as activist initiatives that channel 'transnational circuits of influence … from Harlem to Mazatlán' (see Chapter 4 by Rodríguez). Those circuits may be persistently blocked and black cultural mobilisation hindered within media economies marked, as contributions below by Malik, Cobb, and Wreyford, Bidisha, Hoyes, and others show, by structural inequalities as well as (see Chapter 7 by Mayer, Chapter 8 by Harvey, Chapter 9 by Raengo and Chapter 11 by Thorsen) archival absences and historical amnesia. But *Black Film British Cinema II* enters these circuits as an important resource, and an entirely energising journey across a black British cultural landscape. As in 1988, I thank the editors for inviting me to join the ride.

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Part I
The New Politics of Representation in Black Film

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21	1	Black Film British Cinema: In Three Acts *Sarita Malik*
41	2	On Digitopia and Neoliberal Multiculturalism: Black Cinema and the Image's Digital Regime *Kara Keeling*
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1 Black Film British Cinema: In Three Acts

Sarita Malik

Thirty years ago, pioneers in making and thinking about black cultural production were holding the first *Black Film British Cinema* conference (1988) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA). That conference, and the subsequent publication of ICA Documents 7 of the same title, were to become critical interventions for a generation of emerging scholars, students, and practitioners interested in the place of film culture in the formation of national identities. As transformative as that moment was, I would like to revisit why those interventions mattered, and take up one of the key questions that a retrospective of that period poses for the current moment; what has, and what has not, become of black British film?

Black British film (film that has involved a significant black presence in the means of production) has, in varying degrees, been racially governed through discursive, institutionalised frames such as 'multicultural arts' and 'diversity' (both 'cultural' and 'creative') (Malik, 2013). Outside of these contexts, it has demonstrated its radical potential as a form of culture that can provoke, disrupt, and recode normative understanding of the British experience. The question of black British *cinema* (as distinct from film) pertains to other dimensions such as the curatorship, programming, distribution, and exhibition required for theatrical release. In what is now being described as a post-cinema landscape, how might we, in current contexts, strategise around the spaces of representation from which black British film might be able to resist prevailing forms of racialised governance both within the screen sector and in wider society? What kind of creative interruptive practices and possibilities emerge in the seemingly less

hierarchical post-cinema age, but when one is still disenfranchised by industrial processes such as commissioning, funding, distribution, and policy and by the wider hostile environment that has ensued? How sustainable is a model of film production that is, to use a phrase by bell hooks when speaking about the site of marginality, 'part of the whole, but outside of the main body' (hooks, 1984, xvi)?

My use of the term 'black' is informed by how it was referenced in this earlier, formative moment which was, in Stuart Hall's words, used with 'deliberate imprecision', not as a 'sign of a genetic imprint but as a signifier of difference' (Hall, 2006: 2). This is an idea of 'black' as a political umbrella term that historically forged progressive alliances, including amongst filmmakers themselves, between those of African, Asian, and Caribbean heritage in the UK. It is also an idea that recognises the instability of the term 'black' and its over-determination by a complex set of social relations and questions of identity that have seen these alliances fracture since the mid-late 1980s (Alexander, 2018). The chapter combines personal reflection with cultural historical review in order to discuss the *relations between* shifting structures of governance and power that have helped shape an aspect of British culture that has sought to reshape our national story, even as its formations have mutated. My interest is in the shifting role and value of what has variously been understood as a politically oppositional film culture or cinema of resistance.

Revisiting some of these early debates, black film was recognised as a site of struggle emerging within vexed forms of racial politics under Thatcherism in the UK. It provided an alternative lens to the ways in which mainstream narratives (in press, television and cinema for example) constructed 'the black experience'. The chapter is structured around three interrelated phases that reference the artistic and social contexts of black-British film and, in keeping with a relationship to film narration, is organised in a classic three-act structure representing each of the three decades that have passed since that determining moment. I recognise that these phases have as much in common as what makes them distinct, hence the emphasis on the *relations* and intensified continuities between them. The three-act structure also alludes to Hall's 'Black diaspora artists in Britain: three "moments" in post-war history', in how it attempts to 'make connections between works of art and wider social histories without collapsing the former or displacing the latter' (Hall, 2006: 23).

In May 2017, people assembled at Goldsmiths and the ICA to remember the first iteration of *Black Film British Cinema*. In the same month, a symposium took place marking the Birmingham Centre for

Contemporary Cultural Studies' publication, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982), a major piece of scholarship that linked the construction of an authoritarian state in Britain with the growth of popular racism in the 1970s. Although 'race', culture, and identity are always being constituted by geo-political transformations, ideas of 'blackness' are today deeply situated within a new cultural politics of difference. This is being manufactured as crises and articulated as a rising xenophobia forming the basis of renewed populist movements that are partly being fuelled by mainstream media discourses, the latest stage in a post-war British social and cultural history of racism and anti-racism. A new exclusionary idea of national belonging recognisable in the former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's assertion at the 2016 Conservative Party Conference that 'if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere' has converged with the anti-immigrant rhetoric that framed both the 2016 EU Referendum campaign and the 2019 General Election. This is a politics that repudiates globalisation, hybridity, and 'unassimilable' forms of cultural difference and seeks to ridicule and protect itself against what is now commonly termed 'woke' culture (to be 'woke' essentially means being alert to social justice). These new agendas, in producing what was declared by the UK government in 2012 as a deliberately 'hostile environment', act as a direct negation of the idea of diasporic belonging that early black film was so invested in. If the earlier forms of hostility, rising populisms and racialised regimes of representation at the crossroads of the 1980s coincided with interruptive film practice seeking to challenge those forces, the current conjuncture is overlaid with new institutional demands and discourses of conservative nationalism that appear to limit such possibilities. Black British film exemplifies the indeterminacy around the kind of cultural work that specific economic, social, and political processes help produce; that is, modes of cultural production cannot be determined, always in the same way, based on the conditions of their existence.

The politics of representation that Stuart Hall first introduced us to in his seminal 'New Ethnicities', delivered at the 1988 ICA conference, has accumulated new meanings. It is a cultural continuum that has coincided with ongoing claims for fairer representation and challenges to sector inequalities against the backdrop of a new 'clamour of nationalism' that has become 'the politics of everything' in governing nation-state politics (Valluvan, 2019). Hall told us then about black culture not, by chance, 'occurring at the margins, but placed, positioned at the margins, as the consequence of a set of quite specific political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and "normalized"

the representational and discursive spaces of English society' (Hall, 1988: 27). If those conditions of existence set in motion black cultural forms which sought to interrupt the 'relations of representation' through struggles for access, in our current condition black British film has hit an *impasse* as exclusionary tactics have renewed themselves to sustain a creative sector that is imbued with racially marked as well as intersectional inequalities (Malik and Shankley, 2020). The everyday encounters, modes of practice, and creative tussles that so-called 'minority producers' have increasingly had to collide with – or indeed collude with – since the early 2000s is a requirement from the paradigmatic 'creative economy' that has forcefully come to characterise culture itself (Schlesinger, 2017), shaping the possibilities of black British film in new ways. But so too has the digital space, altering reception practices as well as the way films can be produced, circulated, marketed and remembered.

Act One: Black Film, Openness and Critical Interventions – 1987–97

Thinking back to the 1980s, the idea of 'openness' (critical, intellectual, radical) was a key feature of this moment of complexity and theoretical intervention in understandings of culture, identity, and representation. This offered an exciting intellectual period that was to be fragmented by a rapid contrast. On the one hand, this was a moment of hopefulness for the future of black cultural production. On the other, it rather depressingly prophesied some of the complexities that black film was to go on to be bound by. The title *Black Film British Cinema* was pertinent – black film *as* British cinema was not just the underlying provocation, but an assertion; locating black cultural production within (not outside) constructions of national identity and opening up the space of the national at a time when the very idea of 'Britishness' was being contested. So *too* could 'black film' be 'British cinema'. It voiced and juxtaposed the presence of black film with its relative absence in British cinema (with regards to the industrial complex that selects which films come to screen). The implication in the title that 'film' (black and otherwise) can occupy the space of the more highbrow sounding, spectator-oriented industrial dimension of film, also invited a direct probing of both the distinction between high and low culture and between different kinds of visual orders or 'scopic regimes' (Metz, 1977). Even in these apparently simple ways, it triggered critical (and still radical) debates at the intersection of screen and cultural theory based around an enthusiastic interdisciplinarity,

converging in a unique and more open form of *critical race studies film criticism*. Such an advanced theoretical proposition approached screen theory in its broadest sense, suggesting an intermediality that connected film with other spaces such as television, literature, and visual arts. Practically, this made perfect sense given film's strong links to other media forms and notably to television through shared personnel, funding, distribution, exhibition, and increasingly economic and cultural objectives. Channel 4, for example, supported many of the early films through funding and screenings in cinemas before transmission. Participants at the 1988 ICA conference were academics, critics, curators, programmers, building an inclusive, and collaborative way of thinking about the field. Cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer helped produce this space of critical openness, pointing to the interdependence of theory and practice.

The 'cultural turn' described in 'New Ethnicities' represented what Hall called the 'end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (Hall, 1988: 28); a new liberatory position from which the black artist or filmmaker could speak and a more diverse expectation of black representation to articulate difference not just across communities and individuals, but within them as well. Hall pinpointed this transformational politics as 'a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself' (28) so it became less about access and more about decoding what such representation means. This influential conceptualisation of Britain's new multiculturalism was articulated in feature films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Dir: Stephen Frears 1985), *Looking for Langston* (Dir: Isaac Julien 1989), and *Young Soul Rebels* (Dir: Isaac Julien 1991), as well as in shorter form films such as those that emerged from the independent sector. The retrospectively, globally acclaimed workshop movement, notably the work of Black Audio Film Collective, Ceddo and Sankofa sought to make audiences more self-reflexive precisely through the recoding of dominant racialised discourses such as those that had been screened on British television for decades, particularly in realist formats. This was work that was preceded by the critical, albeit limited, presence of black artists in Britain such as those involved in Festac 77, the Organisation for Black Arts Advancement and Leisure Activities, Creation for Liberation, and the Black Art Gallery (Chambers, 2012).

The revelatory potential of black British film of the 1980s emerged against a socio-political backdrop of racial violence and social exclusion, signalling the paradoxes of black cultural production and

perhaps the necessary conditions for this kind of radical grassroots cultural intervention to thrive. Black film production was a range of collective, creative interventions where the interrogative, interruptive, and aesthetic were converging to assert a critical, visual presence. In brings to mind bell hooks' idea of 'radical openness' (hooks, 1989), a disruptive practice emanating from spaces that have actually been marginalised through structural inequalities, enacted through spaces that have been chosen as a central location for the production of social action that can 'conceptualise alternatives, often improvised' (hooks, 1989: 19). Here, the lived experience of marginality becomes not just about deprivation, but also a site of resistance and radical possibility; chosen as a critical response to domination, reformulated here as a progressive coalition of race, gender, sexuality, and class solidarity, now articulated through film as a form of radical cultural practice.

These self-representational practices were contingent on a certain level of institutional support. The governing contexts of 1980s multiculturalism, a liberal principle predicated on the idea of mutual co-existence, was deliberately agitated by the more radical expressions of municipal, anti-racist politics inscribed in the Labour local authorities as a response to the 1981 UK riots and the subsequent Scarman Report (1981), as well as exploiting opportunities provided by existing race relations legislation and central government funding (Kushner and Lunn, 1990: 184). While many films were made in an environment of self-organisation and relative independence, what this contextualisation draws attention to is that local and national public policy was also one of the conditions through which black cultural production arose. Thus, the state occupied a contradictory space. While the law, police, education, and, indeed, the media were implicated in structures of racism (intersecting with a deep class bias) as forms of 'institutional racism' (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967) that were later to be recognised in the Lawrence/Macpherson moment of the mid to late 1990s, the state also had its own approaches to the management of culture. Publicly funded avenues such as the Greater London Council (GLC) local authority helped boost local democracy through the support of discriminated against local citizen groups, including disadvantaged students and minority artists primarily under the banner of 'multicultural arts'. In the same year that it set up its Black Arts Centre, 1985, the GLC held the 'Third Eye Film Festival' to be followed by the Anti-Racist Film Programme, through which black filmmakers were able to promote and exhibit their work. The 1982 Workshop Declaration had provided financial security and new audiences for the independent sector, evolving from discussions

between the Independent Filmmakers Association, the British Film Institute (BFI), Channel 4 and ACTT. Promoting an 'integrative practice' model, the Declaration led to the aforementioned franchised workshops coming from outside of mainstream film and television culture, with a particular focus on ethnic diversity and a commitment to local issues.

In 'De Margin and De Centre' (1988), Julien and Mercer identified these developments in the institutional framework of UK public funding as arising from a wider social and political struggle to secure black rights to representation. Creatively, there was an emphasis in the emergent films, on syncretism not integration, on fluidity not fixity, on the processes of differentiation as much as the differences themselves. There was a discernible aesthetic shift, with films such as Sankofa's *Territories* (1984) moving away from the social realist tradition of the 1970s and early 1980s towards the more experimental turn of the late 1980s and 1990s. As a deconstructive documentary, assembling intermittent imagery with repetitive voice-over and eclectic source music; the first part of *Territories* assembled 'official' documentary footage of the Notting Hill Carnival with the second part presenting two filmmakers deconstructing that footage in order to implicitly mobilise a critique of the established documentary realist mode and of media stereotyping of the Carnival.

Sites of exclusion depend on borders, including those established in the prevailing forms and tones of cultural criticism. Julien and Mercer noted how film theory (exemplified by the *Screen* journal from whose pages they were now mobilising this critique) 'participated in a phase of British left culture that inadvertently marginalized race and ethnicity as a consequence of the centrifugal tendency of its "high theory" ' (Julien and Mercer, 1988: 7). As an important alternative, the BFI's African-Caribbean Unit's publication of the *Black Film Bulletin* magazine, edited by June Givanni and Gaylene Gould, was by the mid-1990s, to become a significant platform that facilitated a 'depth of cross-collaborative ideas and intersectional dialogues' that acted 'symbolically as a trans-generational, critical intervention on Black creative tradition' (Asante, 2014). The films themselves, in addition to related cultural theory and wider forms of engagement such as the *Black Film Bulletin*, became modes of representation that radically opened up and directly subverted from *within* the mainstream cultural sector, be it Channel Four or the BFI.

Of course, not all work was political in the same way, and some more nuanced in its anti-racist sensibilities such as Retake Film Collective's *Majhdar* (1984). Other film practices were arguably

marginalised within what was now regarded as black British cinema (the work of the Bangladesh-born filmmaker, Ruhul Amin, stands out as an example). Curator and scholar Eddie Chambers has critiqued the historisation of black British arts of the 1980s, arguing that there is a 'a profound *not knowing*' about the range of black British artists' participation more widely (Chambers, 2012: 3). Further, Carol Dixon points to the problems of the prioritisation of selected archival repositories and research collections which have led to the dominance of certain kinds of narrative repositories around black British art history (Dixon, 2017). A glaring omission from prevailing historical accounts is the role of black women including in the film workshop movement, for example, Martina Attille (*Dreaming Rivers*, 1989), Maureen Blackwood (*The Passion of Remembrance*, 1986, with Isaac Julien), and Elmina Davis (director of *Omega Rising*, 1988) who were the precursors of today's artist filmmakers such as Rehana Zaman, Onyeka Igwe, and Ayo Akingbade. The story of curation, archiving, and exhibition of black British film also remains hidden within these histories. Another critical question that arises is whether the anti-racist, highly politicised film culture that this decade is now best known for might have produced its own iterative and essentialised typologies of black cultural production that may have even limited the boundaries of others' experimentalism at the time. For all this, a final observation of Act One is that it generated a perhaps impossible burden of expectation about the kinds of cultural possibilities to follow, especially against the powerful effects of the creeping neoliberalism that was to impact on the cultural terrain in the subsequent decade.

Act Two: The Fragmentation of the 'Black' in Black British Cinema – 1997–2007

If the 1980s were shaped by these kinds of openings and forms of connectivity, the mid- to late 1990s was marked by closure and fragmentation. The few spaces and funding streams which had explicitly supported black film in the 1980s no longer existed or were, by this point, revising their policies in line with the latest cultural imperatives; by the end of the decade their practical legacy seemed quite ephemeral. In 1993, the Black Art Gallery was shut down. A thriving African-Caribbean Unit at the BFI, one of the few institutional spaces specifically geared towards supporting the exhibition and critical momentum around black British and diaspora cinemas, was in the process of being closed (late 1996). These were

losses that intersected with a broader politics of cultural assimilation and a turn from anti-racist to post-multiculturalist sensibilities. Post-multiculturalism was underpinned by an assumption of cultural meritocracy and assimilation. At the same time, there was continued institutional support with partial funding from the BFI, BBC Films, Film4 and the Arts Council Lottery Fund. This led to films such as *Welcome II the Terrordome* (Dir: Ngozi Onwurah, 1994), *My Son, The Fanatic* (Dir: Udayan Prasad, 1997), and *Speak Like A Child* (Dir: John Akomfrah, 1998). Concurrently, national television broadcast was becoming a primary vehicle for black film rather than the theatrical distribution to qualify as British cinema.

Sociological scholarship (Les Back, Stuart Hall) has drawn attention to the weakening in commitment to social democratic reforms and its determination to modernise through expanding neoliberal policies that, in turn, impacted on the cultural terrain. When the New Labour regime came to office in 1997 it inaugurated a process of disavowal of, and a disavowal of the history of, left, feminist, and anti-racist work. McRobbie has analysed this in relation to feminism as a 'complexification of backlash' – in which the gains of the 1970s and 1980s came to subsequently be undermined (McRobbie, 2004). Both multiculturalism and anti-racism were now derided in wider public discourse, and resources were reallocated, assuming that the 'ethnic minority' groups of the 1970s and 1980s had now been, to quote Channel 4's then CEO, speaking in 2001, 'assimilated into the mainstream of society' (Jackson, 2001). The broader effect on black arts through the curtailment of the power of local government by the incoming commercial regime evidenced the increasing requirement to programme more populist, commercially driven work in order to 'break even'. Some have argued about the inevitability of public monies being retracted with Chambers pessimistically suggesting that the process of state funding, by its very nature, 'often consigns what it touches, to failure, disappointment, or a disempowering and moribund existence' (Chambers, 2012: 257).

Film policy was to become one of the areas in which New Labour immediately intervened upon entering government and the arts and culture more widely became a subject of political interest, influencing cultural policy directions, including how the 'creative economy' was to become a central policy object (Schlesinger, 2017). One of New Labour's legacies was the UK Film Council (UKFC) set up in 2000 to bring sustainability to the UK film industry. As Nwonka and Malik (2018) argue in their analysis of the production context for the 2005 film *Bullet Boy* (Dir: Saul Dibb), co-funded by the UKFC, it was

championed as their example of diversity commitment, but which can now be conceived within an overtly commercial imperative for British cinema. *Bullet Boy* typified the instrumentalist template for much of what would later purport to be British 'urban film': a prevailing and reductive narrative trope of black criminality through which the black British experience has been narrated in contemporary culture (Malik and Nwonka, 2018). 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 now famously termed 'Cool Britannia'. This marked the monetisation of the UK's creative sector and an increasingly economic dimension in how culture was perceived (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2015). For Smith, such a hard wiring of the cultural sector for neoliberal reformation was most evident in his claim that 'as a new Government, we have recognised the importance of this whole industrial sector that no one hitherto conceived of as "industry" ' (Smith, 1998: 26). This does not alone account for the dramatic shift that black British film was to face, because the wider political climate had also changed in other ways by the late 1990s. The choice for publics, as Jeremy Gilbert (2017) has observed, was now between a cosmopolitan version of neoliberalism represented by New Labour, or a new Right authoritarianism that had turned openly towards nationalistic populism, as a strategic response to the consequences of globalisation. This paved the way for our contemporary moment, symbolised two decades on by the UK's retraction from the European Union and a narrower conceptualisation of Britishness as part of a broadening and strengthened conservative nationalist agenda.

The rejection of the publicly funded provisions of multiculturalism was one of the signs of what has been termed the 'end of multiculturalism' (Adusei-Poku, 2016). A shift was now taking place towards the more innocuous idea of 'cultural diversity' and a reconstruction of assimilationist policies based around the notion of 'social cohesion'. A process of managerialism through depoliticisation, *infused from above*, involved separating the idea of the state from the idea of structure, now sitting in sharp contrast to that 1999 Macpherson report (Kapoor, 2013) which had put institutional racism on the public agenda. Furthermore, the accompanying fragmentation of the notion 'black', the foundation of which was laid in the previous decade, also led to a demise of critical voices of solidarity, including through film. The fragmentation of a strong black British political movement based on flexible solidarities was therefore abetted by the neoliberal institutionalisation of anti-racist activities but also by the

rise in black British social conservatism characterised, according to Warmington, by 'deliberate breaks with the social analyses developed by the black and anti-racist left' (2015: 1159). In any case, the limits of the notion 'black' as Hall acknowledged in the mid-2000s, also needed to be addressed because 'in the age of refugees, asylum seekers and global dispersal – [black] will no longer do' (Hall, 2006: 22). The presence of increasingly multiple, albeit overlapping 'outsiders', as well as a more networked and global media ecology was inevitably starting to shake up the idea of who and what is situated as marginal, including in terms of national film cultures.

Within what was now commonly termed as the 'creative industries', a premium was placed on freelance, contract-culture entertainment. This was mirrored within the television sector with a focus on films, programmes, and genres increasingly tied to notions of industry and economy. Within these working contexts (because in the new creative economy, cultural production was inextricably tied to the idea of 'cultural work'), there was now even less room for 'failure'. The short film format, which could be produced on smaller budgets, continued as a valuable space for film experimentation, including for black women. Amongst these were Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful* (1991), Maureen Blackwood's *Perfect Image?* (1989), and Avril E. Russell's *Distinction and Revolver* (1996). Partially as a consequence of the fragmentation of 'black', and a certain process of self-scrutiny about the politics of mainstreaming during the 1990s, it was rendered possible to now speak of a distinctive form of British Asian cinema that had momentarily secured its place in the economy of what Hartman termed 'hypervisibility' (Hartman, 1997). Leading the way was British Asian female filmmaker Gurinder Chadha whose first feature, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1992), was part soap opera, part romantic comedy, part Bollywood melodrama, establishing the hybrid model for this tranche of crossover film. Asian Britons were now becoming the incumbents of a globalised, modern kind of creative culture, with the 'Bollywoodisation' of British culture becoming especially rife, compatible with the new internationalism represented by the aspirations and mechanisms put in place for 'going global'. By reaching an audience way beyond the art house and festival circuit, films such as *East is East* (Dir: Damien O'Donnell, 1999) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (Dir: Gurinder Chadha, 2002) facilitated a commercially successful celebration of New Labour's multicultural pluralism. *East is East*, a semi-autobiographical melodrama with broad-based appeal, would win a BAFTA and was a major UK box office success. The film touched on universal themes of love, alienation and generational

conflict through the spectacle of 1970s popular paraphernalia; spacehoppers, parka coats and bellbottoms. For its screenwriter, Ayub Khan Din, hiring a White Irish director, Damien O' Donnell, was a calculated decision in order to get the film commissioned. The parallel lived reality was the more modest film careers of important figures who had helped lay the foundations of black British cinema, including Yugesh Walia, Ruhul Amin, and Ahmed A. Jamal.

A focus on the divergent trajectories of black and Asian British cinema reveals the fascinating racial economies of contemporary British cinema. Where the culture clash/comedy-drama became a template for a now desirable incarnation of British Asian cinema, the urban/crime/youth drama became the trope of 'black' film (which as the 2019 film *Blue Story* (Dir. Andrew Onwubolu (Rapman)) was later to demonstrate is often taken up as a sign of 'real' potential disorder). But institutionally, black and British Asian cinema was coded more systematically – 'specialised', cultural', 'minority', 'ethnic', 'culturally diverse', or 'urban' – differentiated and marked out from the centre of British cinema culture. This recalls Gilroy's apparently prophetic claim about racially marked representations that, 'where West Indian Culture is weak, Asian communities suffer from a surfeit of culture that is too strong' (Gilroy, 1983: 131). Thus, the lens through which these films of variable 'box office success' (if we are to use that as a measure of value) came into being was acutely racialised and highly managed within a now much more commercially oriented, and indeed multinational culture industry, serving as cloned and 'low-risk' formulas precisely because they oriented around the pathologisation of (different kinds of) cultural difference. Intensifying forms of capital overlapped with how black screen representation and production were being formed and these dynamics were to institute much of what was to happen in the next decade.

Act Three: Current Frames: Black British film in the Creative Economy

As in any act of historicisation, the present is always the most difficult period to grasp. And just as post-multiculturalism and now post-racial become part of the post-signalling tendency, there is a burgeoning scholarship on how film has now well and truly left the cinema, departed from the cinematic regimes of the twentieth century and resulted in a 'post-cinema' age (Hagener, Hediger, and Strohmaier 2016) which has seen the end of medium specificity Significant developments in technological environment have indeed

involved the displacement of 35 mm and analogue film in favour of digital formats. *YouTube* emerged at the end of Act 2 (2005) marking the beginning of a golden age of independent filmmaking, and Act 3 ends with the arrival of Netflix's production hub at Shepperton Studios in the UK (2019). Some black filmmakers work with Netflix and other streaming services, while supporting their 'passion projects' on the side (sometimes more experimental or tackling social issues they are interested in). Meanwhile, film has been rendered free of the constraints of cinema; it exists in a gallery context, in the street, on planes and cars and on digital communication platforms, enabling what Hagener, Hediger, and Strohmaier (2016) call a 'low-end' of the circulation of filmic images, and informal networks of exchange and transaction.

Social media, online crowdfunding and video-sharing websites such as Vimeo all provide further opportunity to build solidarities, networks, and direct engagement with audiences. As Francesca Sobande observes in her work on black women filmmakers and spectatorship, video-sharing spaces such as YouTube can provide 'young Black women viewers with a stronger sense of ownership over their media spectator experiences' (Sobande, 2017: 665).

Digital potential is therefore equated with the promise of an updated modality of relative independence, equality, and connectivity that can take place outside institutional spaces, and where political and social transformations seem more possible precisely through these new forms of circulation, presentation, and marketing in which black filmmakers can make the most of alternative forms of visibility. Such 'bottom-up' possibilities help us to better understand the politics of marginalised producers and forms of production, in that they potentially weaken hierarchical structures of power and representation and therefore enables us to think about the optimum *spaces of representation* through which black film might (re)mobilise itself.

This latest period has brought us important examples of diverse film practices within black British cinema, some with institutional support. The year 2013 was notable for the films of John Akomfrah, Steve McQueen, and Amma Asante, a period which has seen these three filmmakers become rare permanent markers of a black presence in British cultural life. Akomfrah's BFI-supported, Sundance award-winning film, *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), was distributed just a few months before Hall's death in 2014. It led to a renewed interest in Akomfrah's work and, more broadly, in black British visual culture. Steve McQueen evolved within a 20-year journey from making

the ten-minute film *Bear* (1993) while at Goldsmiths to being the first black filmmaker to win an Academy Award for Best Picture with *12 Years a Slave* in 2013. McQueen's unique trajectory, a rare story of commercial and international acclaim, is part of a new internationalism into the filmic mainstream, and from an ostensibly non-mainstream set of stylistic approaches. Amma Asante's romantic period drama, *Belle* (2013), taken up for UK distribution by Fox Searchlight Pictures, marks a particular success with regards to the vexed issue of distribution.

The relations between the different periods of black British film run deep. George Amponsah's 2015 observational documentary feature, BFI-supported, and BAFTA nominated *The Hard Stop*, named after the police procedure, told the story of Mark Duggan's death in 2011 that was to be followed by riots in London that summer. The film shares some of the traits of the earlier deconstructive documentaries, notably Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* made 30 years earlier. It assembles mainstream media representations of the Duggan killing alongside personal testimonies, retelling the story from an alternative perspective and tracing the linkages between Duggan and the death of Cynthia Jarrett in 1985 that sparked the Broadwater Farm riots (similar to Duggan, Jarrett's death was marred by controversy). *The Hard Stop* can be considered as part of a broader tradition led by black visual artists of referencing the conditions, nature, and occurrence of riots in the making of black British history and serves as a fine recent example of black film's continuing radical potential.

While such films stand out, the forces of capital have accelerated cultural commodification within the mainstream, while local and regional capabilities have been squeezed since 2008 by a financial austerity agenda that has restricted support for public spaces (local film clubs and community cinemas, community centres, youth services, and societies) for creative exchange, production, and exhibition. There has been a fresh impetus to tackle these restrictions head-on and recent years have seen a range of independent initiatives to counter the obstacles of distribution and exhibition. There are several current examples, many female-led, of programmes, seasons and initiatives to boost the visibility of black film and bring it to a range of audiences (outlined in detail in So Mayer's contribution in this collection). June Givanni's Pan African Cinema Archive demonstrates the care with which this film history is being preserved and circulated, even in fragile circumstances. In 2020, the Independent Cinema Office toured 'Second Sight', to foreground the work of black women in the workshop movement, and commissioned new work by black

women filmmakers, some of it inspired by the work of those who set the foundation of black British film such as Claudette Johnson. For filmmaker Ayo Akingbade,

> I knew from day one that I would feature artist Claudette Johnson's artwork *Trilogy (Parts One, Two and Three) 1982–6* … the film is partly an ode to her and countless women who were involved in the movement, but who are now either forgotten or simply not spoken about to the same degree as their male counterparts.
>
> (Akingbade, 2020)

Of note with respect to the question of distribution is Priscilla Igwe's The New Black Film Collective (TNBFC), a nationwide network of film exhibitors, educators, and programmers of black representation on screen. In 2015, Igwe and TNBFC pushed for the UK distribution of the low-budget, partly crowd-funded US comedy-drama, *Dear White People* (Dir: Justin Simien), on learning that the DVD and Video on Demand timeframe could be altered to allow for a full theatrical release. TNBFC made public appeals for the BFI to reverse its decision and provide lottery funding, which it eventually did by shifting its distribution strategy. In its appeal, Black Activists Rising Against Cuts and TNBFC called out what they identified as the industry's racist practices that directly inhibited black film *as* British cinema:

> We believe that the response to 'Dear White People' by the UK film industry is part of a wider problem of institutional racism in the industry, whereby films featuring black characters, exploring race and identity and / or made by black producers/directors are repeatedly rejected for theatrical release, meaning that they go straight to DVD/ Blue Ray release.
>
> (www.change.org/p/uk-cinemas-bfi-screen-dear-white-people-in-cinemas-across-the-uk)

If the 1980s represented a value of black film that was strongly related to ideas of social democracy, what remains today, vis-à-vis a period of mounting marketisation of culture through the 1990s and early 2000s, is an idea of value that views culture through the prism of unescapable market forces. This has eroded spaces of municipal support for black British film and imposed other agendas that it now

has to grapple with, in what has been a dual story of resistance and governance. The question of resistance co-exists with some hard realities in the screen sector. Black Britons are less likely to work in the creative industries than their white counterparts and more likely to experience unemployment from precarious labour in the sector (Malik and Shankley, 2020). In spite of the post-racial signalling and a thriving cultural policy diversity agenda, industry data continues to report the real systemic inequalities in the sector, particularly behind-the-scenes. *Creative Skillset's* 2012 *Employment Census* found that BAME (by now the preferred term in public policy) representation in the industry declined across production, distribution and exhibition between 2009 and 2012. BAME employment in the film production sector fell from around 10 per cent to 3 per cent. There has been a growth in recent literature that evidences a deep connection between social and cultural inequality in the creative sector, though there remains considerable scope for the specific issues around race and the UK film sector to be examined. The implications of this long-standing under-representation suggests that the UK's BAME communities experience multi-dimensional inequalities and forms of discrimination, an example of which can be found in the film sector. That the exclusion of BAME groups in the sector has continued unabated over the last decade where the non-white workforce remains below 5 per cent (CAMEo, 2018) speaks to the failures of decades of diversity policy (Nwonka, 2020).

Limited opportunity in the UK has led to what has been termed 'Black flight' – where black directorial and acting talent has progressively moved to the US for recognition. This in turn has caused a rather perverse set of recent discussions about black British actors taking opportunities of work away from black US actors. The specific UK environment is brought into even sharper focus when discussed in comparison to the recent body of black-directed films in the US. While there are obvious differences between the UK and US production contexts in terms of budgets and a critical mass of black spectatorship, Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), and Trey Edward Shult's *Waves* (2029) all demonstrate how commercial and critical success can be achieved while also recoding dominant racialised representations; all of these examples capturing primarily the multiple facets of black masculinity.

Institutionally within the UK screen sector, inequalities are restated again and again, while diversity initiatives gain traction. In late 2016, the British Academy of the Film and Television Arts

(BAFTA) announced new initiatives to boost the numbers of ethnic minority and socially disadvantaged filmmakers, including plans for more diverse membership and reworked eligibility criteria for some of its award categories. In 2020, BAFTA failed to nominate any non-white people in acting categories, signalling a spate of public criticisms of the industry's deep whiteness. The new diversity model is a form of depoliticisation, signalling a gradual institutional repositioning of anti-racism to 'multiculturalism' to cultural diversity and a new emphasis on the now well-established (and essentially de-raced industry discourse) 'creative diversity' (Malik, 2013). A new focus on 'talent', 'training', and extreme competition is part of the overarching 'creative economy' enterprise that in any case never had as its central priority the tackling of systemic, structural inequalities within the creative sector.

Cultural 'workers', including black filmmakers, are themselves implicated in an industry that has shifted towards these neoliberal market models. It is not simply the case that these diversity models, themselves forms of governance, are resisted. Rather, the 'art of acquiescence' is required – if one is to work within or be supported by such institutional spaces (Nwonka, 2020). If the 1970s to 1980s represented the moment when 'race' had been 'fully indigenized' (Hall, 2006: 17) then this is the decade that institutionalised diversity subsumed it, as race and racism are rarely identified or referenced in these new governing contexts of 'social mobility' and 'creative diversity'. One can assess such a process of defining racism out of its existence as an ideological and discursive mechanism and a form of 'racial neoliberalism' in which, as David Goldberg puts it, 'The postracial buries, alive, those very conditions that are the grounds of its own making' (Goldberg, 2015). In this regard, institutionalised diversity functions as what Herman Gray describes as a 'technology of power, a means of managing the very difference it expresses' (Gray, 2016: 242).

Conclusion

Our current moment can be characterised as one involving both restraint and yet transformative possibility. Digital capabilities are a space of representation that might be the cause for some optimism in how they are making accessible so much of this marginalised critical canon, otherwise silenced or forgotten, asserting through their circulation on YouTube, Vimeo or the BFI player a critical 'audiovisual memory of our culture' (Ruschmeyer, 2012: 36). Nana Adusei-Poku (2016), in her work on 'post black art', proposes that any transformation

is likely to be a performative approach that takes place outside of institutions. This conjuncture comes into being precisely because of the technological and related economic evolution through which it is being claimed visual culture, digitality, and politics can converge. But its backdrop is what needs to be understood as one permeated by ongoing institutional failures, or perhaps manoeuvres. The film sector today, as it did in the 1980s, continues to marginalise black filmmakers and black films.

Moten's work that links aesthetics of the black radical tradition with radical ideas of freedom (Moten, 2008) and hooks' arguments about the 'radical openness' that becomes possible from being in that space of the margins foregrounds the ongoing predicament of margins and centre. From where can anti-racist strategies within black cultural production be built? As I close, I return to Hall's comment in 'New Ethnicities' about the conjuncture of the *relations of representation* (which today pertains to issues of access, labour, precarity) and the conjuncture of the *politics of representation* (based on the contested meanings that representation always opens itself up to). Since these are still in the frame, as it were, then it seems that we can speak of a new stage and struggle which is centred on the *spaces of representation*. How do we start to address the problem of *from which spaces* black cultural production can be most effectively presented, positioned in a way that moves beyond its classic and present-day restrictions? To this end, an ontology of black British film in its three interrelated acts becomes a framework in which we can address, and eventually challenge, the past, present, and sometimes overbearing forms of social and cultural governance. These are forms that have simultaneously helped to de-marginalise but also re-marginalise and have therefore shaped the possibilities of the very 'black film as British cinema' that we are even able to assemble ourselves around, over 30 years on.

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