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Untimely Meditations: Reflections on the Black Audio Film Collective

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UNTIMELY

John Akomfrah, *Memory Room 451*, 20 mins., 1997. Black Audio Films for ZDF/Arte TV

Kodwo Eshun

It is no exaggeration to say that the installation of *Handsworth Songs* (1985) at *Documenta11* introduced a new audience and a new generation to the work of the Black Audio Film Collective. An artworld audience weaned on Fischli and Weiss emerged from the black cube with a dramatically expanded sense of the historical, poetic, and aesthetic project of the legendary British group.

The critical acclaim that subsequently greeted *Handsworth Songs* only underlines its reputation as the most important and influential art film to emerge from England in the last twenty years. It is perhaps inevitable that *Handsworth Songs* has tended to overshadow the eleven remaining films produced by the Collective in their fifteen-year history. If critical attention has rightly focused on the implications of that celebrated debut, an unfortunate side effect of that recognition has been the neglect of a body of work that extends from 1983 to 1998.

In its totality, the work of John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, David Lawson, and Trevor Mathison remains terra infirma. There are good reasons internal and external to the group why this is so, and any sustained exploration of the Collective's work should begin by identifying the reasons for that occlusion. Such an analysis in turn sets up the discursive parameters for a close hearing and viewing of the visionary project of the Black Audio Film Collective.

We can locate the moment when the YBA narrative achieved cultural liftoff in 1996 with Douglas Gordon's Turner Prize victory. The subsequent triumphalist exportation of that narrative has, until recently, succeeded in blocking the preoccupations of previous artistic generations.

One strangely unremarked effect of *Documenta11*, articulated in Britain only through mean-spirited muttering, was to call time on this hegemony. For those alert to the repositioning and

realignment of form and value, however, *Documental1* announced a resurgence of interest in the generation long overshadowed by the YBAs. For the first time in years, figures such as Zarina Bhimji, Black Audio, Cerith Wyn Evans, and Isaac Julien, all of whom emerged in the mid-'80s, were evaluated, contextualized, and affirmed as canonical artists of postwar European culture.

Such a reconsideration of the '80s generation throws inter-generational differences into relief. This becomes more striking when one contrasts Black Audio with successful young black artists of the 1990s, such as Ellen Gallagher, Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili, and Kara Walker. As Kobena Mercer astutely pointed out, these "younger artists no longer feel responsible for a blackness that is itself increasingly hypervisible in the global market of multicultural commodity fetishism."¹ Their response to this hyper-visibility has been to operate through strategies of "mute or evasive positioning."

Artists today evince a coy slipperiness of address, aesthetic, and self-fashioning, an elusive approach that can be understood as a protective response to "diversity increasingly administered as a social and cultural norm in postmodernity."¹ To contemporary ears, the very name of Black Audio Film Collective strikes a note of Fanonian seriousness at odds with the strategies of deracialization and disidentification common to contemporary artists. Fashions have changed; BAFC now appears to shoulder a burden of representation others have long since shrugged off. As a statement of intent, their name now sounds direct to a fault, confrontational even, in comparison with the equivocation of today's sophisticates. Any reckoning with the work of BAFC then obliges one to reorientate one's discursive position, to

die; it is not too difficult to discern British critical/cultural neglect toward the BAFC as an act of sustained petty revenge for their refusal to do just that.

From the perspective of 1990s video art, BAFC's "crime" was to continue to invest in the cinematic even as its death was being announced. The development of the moving image within the gallery premised itself on the notion of the death of cinema as art practice. In an artworld spellbound by new media, the group appeared to be stranded in the past.

In Julien's words: "The move into the gallery space to make an installation allegorizes the production conditions of British cinema, which no longer existed as an experimental cinema or an art cinema and that shift became part of an artworld phenomenon."³ Characteristically, the trajectory of BAFC complicates this reading. First, the group functioned as a multimedia collective from the outset. Second, their practice continually moved across media from tape-slide to 16 mm film to 35 mm film to digital video.

That practice should be understood formally as an archaeological excavation into the limits of medial evolution and as a metamedial engagement with the epistemological conditions of the imperial archive. Third, the group certainly were cineastes but not exclusively so. Rather, they operated across the three cultural spaces of the gallery installation, the television broadcast, and the film festival screening, adapting a tripartite strategy that prioritized each according to its potential for intervention.

In its sense of spectacle, contemporary video art disallows such a mixed economy. To reinstate the Collective's work within the black box of the gallery is to reorient installation space away from the hermetic bombast of so much video art toward a quite

REFLECTIONS ON THE BLACK AUDIO FILM COLLECTIVE TATIONS

acknowledge unanswered questions that the all-too-understandable evasions of younger artists tend to elide.

The return to the artistic practice of Black Audio Film Collective entails the return of criticality and its discontents. One is confronted with a scale, a sensibility, a temporality, and an ambition that remains singular, even as its influence is discernible throughout postmodern culture. It is well known that the group, along with several other film workshops, as they were then known, inaugurated an independent Black British film culture in the early '80s. A film culture, as Isaac Julien has elaborated, "which was also part of a conversation with the visual arts—with a number of different practices relating to one another—theory, visual arts, filmmaking, even theatre, performance."²

Faced with capital disinvestment in the early '90s, the majority of Black British film workshops were forced to close. In these circumstances, the proper course of action was to curl up and

distinctive experience: the visual pleasure of historical reverie. This concern for reverie extends into a preoccupation with the phantasmic dimension of historical rupture. Their fascination with the poetics of riot, revolution, coup d'état, exile, assassination, collectivity, and vanguardism should be understood in the wider context of postwar European culture. As Robert JC Young has pointed out, "The success of the anticolonial movements did not fully reestablish the equal value of the cultures of the decolonized nations. What has been new in the years since the Second World War, during which for the most part the decolonization of the European empires has taken place, has been the accompanying attempt to decolonize European thought and the forms of its history as well."⁴

From this perspective, the group may be seen as one wing of the ongoing metahistorical project to elaborate and extend the "knowledge-politics" of decolonization, beyond the 1950s,



Eddie George and Trevor Mathison, *Signs of Empire*, 1983. BAFC Films

1960s, and 1970s into the 1980s and 1990s. By knowledge politics, we mean the aesthetic and political legacies of posthumanism and liberation politics, of decolonization and of deconstruction, the theoretical weapons of Fanon and Foucault, Chris Marker and Glauber-Rocha, Antonioni and Althusser, Walter Benjamin and Wilson Harris, Rodchenko and Paradjanov, Gramsci, and Penderecki. Understood in this way, cultural indifference to the group, mirrored and inverted in their sustained international acclaim, may be understood not merely as antipathy to the filmic but as a form of postcolonial revenge.

After all, Thatcherism's ideological purpose was to destroy the use-value of these postwar traditions. As a collective concerned to construct an avant-garde consciousness through a Maoist inspired ethos of self-critique, the group positioned themselves as far from the privatization of art as it was possible to be. Located at the intersections of several diasporic networks and intellectual legacies, the collective assembled an avant-garde praxis that doubled as the production of a distinctive group subjectivity. This entailed the creation of a poetics for the undoing of the colonial archive that could evoke the phantasmic landscape of the postcolonial aftermath.

In retrospect, it is possible to see that the BAFC oeuvre and group presence constituted a radical interruption of the smooth teleology of twentieth century European film culture, not once but twice over: firstly through the adaptation and realignment of pro-filmic elements from that culture and secondly via the imaginative constitution of diasporic presence as constitutive of European modernity. The implications of this double rupture may be seen if we adapt Irit Rogoff's astute argument that "struggles for liberation and independence pierced the fabric of European and American political culture and ruptured the twentieth century in the middle" so that "events taking place in Africa did not follow those taking place in the West but preceded them and made them possible."⁵

One could argue that BAFC's program for an independent film movement, understood as a productive complication of the inheritance of aesthetic and political liberation, pierced the fabric of Euro-American artistic culture and in so doing ruptured the historiography and self-image of the '80s even as the decade was getting underway. One important result of this cultural reinscription was the reordering of interpretative power relations. The Black Audio film was treated as an event. Film became a discursive platform for radical intervention in culture. Black Audio's work did not follow the museological, theoretical, or academic discourse emerging in America and Europe. Rather, it preceded that discourse and made it possible. The group used the cinematic apparatus as a space for radical thought. Pre-

Handsworth Songs, the group's tape-slide work *Expeditions: Signs of Empire* (1983) did not visualize the concepts then emerging in the essays of Homi Bhabba and Gayatri Spivak.

Instead *Signs of Empire*, in its terror and its austerity, itself manufactured concepts for rethinking European authority far in advance of the academy. It exceeded it by assembling an affective economy that can evoke the psychic consequences of the imperial moment. Equally *Handsworth Songs* (1985) does not visualize postcolonial theory in the manner of Trinh T. Minh-ha. On the contrary, the film carefully assembles a phantasmic landscape that complicates the distinction between the amnesiac present and the postcolonial aftermath. Stuart Hall once asked "When was the post colonial?" and this uncertain sense of an ending complicates historicization.

Postgraduate degrees in Postcolonial Discourse Analysis did not begin in the United Kingdom until 1989; in the United States, even later. *Handsworth Songs* therefore predates the institutionalization of postcolonial studies by a decade. The normalization of multiculturalism that Kobena Mercer explicates is similarly a mid-'90s phenomenon. Today it is common to trace a direct line from the project of BAFC and other '80s artists to the institutionalization of postcolonial studies and then onto corporate multiculturalism, as if the artistic intervention of the first were only truly realized by the business models of the third. This is to naively confuse three distinctive cultural moments and their responses to the ongoing failure of the social. Too often, the rejection of the third becomes an alibi for the neglect of the first.

What is necessary instead is to capture the formal logic that articulates the Collective's practice. The fundamental question remains: "How to rewrite/refilm history when the very model of history is so much a product of the history the group wished to refilm/rewrite?"⁶ The belatedness of the postcolonial epoch set the terms for the Group's deconstructive practice. The documentary format is reinvented through "a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself."⁷

This deconstructive aesthetic emerged most influentially in the creation of a group sensibility discernible throughout their lifespan, an aesthetic that might be characterized as one of ambivalent belonging. Prior to their emergence, the diasporic cultural field was dominated by an emergency rhetoric popular in community activism.

By contrast, the collective elaborated a worldview that was much more complex—a mood of ambivalent British belonging that articulated a paradoxically energizing sense of disenchantment. This position allowed the group to articulate an affective landscape of flux. In a cultural scene determined by activism, aesthetic-self determination would always be way down the agenda, demoted in favor of the immediate response.

If BAFC's insistence on the primacy of form alienated the activist demand for transparency, then the politicization of that formalism disturbed the white avant-garde film community. These discomforts raged around *Handsworth Songs*, which, more than any other work of the decade, realigned the terms of critical engagement. In replacing immediacy with the dialectics of belonging, the group's intervention was widely interpreted as a powerful statement of aesthetic autonomy capable of liberating audience from the contemporary impasses.

Formally speaking, *Handsworth Songs's* impact lay in its projection of an aesthetic capable of supporting a poetics of memory that could dissolve the official amnesia that characterized what little debate existed around the social crisis of the

Handsworth riots. In using official archive to undo itself, the film bypassed the impasse of the present to open up a counter-dimension of historical identification and affective resonance that could move between affection and disaffection, mourning and melancholia, intimacy and solitude.

The authorizing function of the Pathe newsreel and the state broadcasting was arranged through affective temporalities of the retrospective and the prospective, orchestrated into what could be called a time travelogue. A time travelogue is also a ghost story, a myth that dramatizes chronological complication. In the classic ghost story, the present is invaded by the past; equally, one could imagine the reverse scenario in which history is infiltrated by the future, by ghosts yet to exist.

Handsworth Songs suggests it is possible to resurrect the memory of past lives. By invoking those absences, a ghost narrative might emerge, one charged with the fleeting moment of anticipation when colonial subjects believed their mother country would welcome them into a new future. The film marshals all its formal qualities to recover this fragile utopianism, not only to indict the present and to protect the memory of the dead from amnesia but also to come to the assistance of the living at a moment of social breakdown. The result was a post-identitarian space that imbued the pessimism of the intellect with the poetics of the elegiac. Within that conjuncture, the critical role of the aural dimension tends to be ritually acknowledged, in order

to proceed to an engagement with the visuality of the colonial archive.

It is no accident then that three BAFC films—*Handsworth Songs* (1985) *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), and *Three Songs on Pain, Light and Time* (1996) emphasize sonic process in their titles. What happens if critical analysis slows down the rate of perception and sustains a close hearing? If the revisionary archaeology that BAFC are so famous for is listened to as intensively as it is watched? If the ear, for once, pilots the eye through the counter-memorial practice? This is not a matter of downgrading the visual in favor of the sonic; rather it concerns one carefully situating the optical within the triological relay of narration, montage, and sound design so as to gauge the full implications of the BAFC project. With the exception of Sean Cubitt (*Digital Aesthetics*, 2001), attention to the nervous routes between the dimensions of the aural and the filmic has been resoundingly silent.

If I seem intent on redirecting the ongoing dismissal of the aural, that is partly because it has continued for so long that its deafness now passes without comment. Commentators such as Coco Fusco, Stuart Hall, and Kobena Mercer noted the implications of aurality early on. Their insights into the cinesonic have not been pursued. Consequently, an exploration of the aural allows for a further refinement of the formal processes driving the BAFC. What is immediately audible is that Mathison's con-

Manso Kwabena, *Who needs a heart*, 1995, BAFC Films



ception of audio situates itself within serious/avant-garde musical culture.

In the last decade, critical orthodoxy has become so used to coupling black artistic practice with popular culture that the association of the former with the latter has become all but axiomatic. Afrodiasporic artistic practice is automatically assumed to dissolve the high art/low art binary because the former is a fortified zone in need of infiltration/destruction. Post-black art, however defined, is umbilically tied to popular/entertainment culture, its radicalism determined by the extent to which it positions itself at odds with the disciplinary apparatus of high art.

A close encounter with the BAFC film dissolves such commonplaces. If the surprise effect of the BAFC essay film stems initially from its assuredly meditative mode, then I would argue that it stems equally from the high seriousness of its musical address. Against the urban popular then, Mathison consistently favors postwar European composition, which tends to ennoble the already dignified narration with a gravitas that the two elements continue to modulate.

Music does not greet the listener and usher him or her into the presence of the black popular. Even in *Gangster Gangster*, the Collective's final film on the deaths and lives of Tupac Shakur, the "core of affect" that, as Akomfrah states, is always "presumed to be structured around oratory,"⁸ which then itself resides in the urban vernacular, is played with, argued with, and finally discarded. On first listen, there is no affirmative Black Atlantic ora-

tory around which the films organize themselves. This is not to say that Afrodiasporic music never figures in the Group's aural world picture. On the contrary there is much; from the powerful chant of The Jamestown Dirge Singers in *Testament* to the Golden Gate Quartet's elegiac "Precious Memories" in *Who Needs A Heart* to the aerial electronica of "Rhythm is Rhythm" in *The Last Angel of History* (1995). It is rather that oratory is reorganized as a Du Boisian song of sorrow that resides, for the group, within the twentieth-century avant-garde. The role of the sonic is to herald affective resonances across histories, to forge complicities of belonging and intimations of solitude rather than to affirm core values under threat.

Another name for the "core of affect" that is assumed to underlie all diasporic artistic practice might be "soul." One always hears the image in advance of seeing; Mathison's practice announces that soul has not endured intact given the vicissitudes of the twentieth century.

In his influential 1992 *Timeline on Post Soul Culture*, Nelson George dates the advent of post-soul to the Nixon era. Mathison, whose audio design for BAFC enacts a sonic thought process as rich as that of Alan Splet for David Lynch or Walter Murch's work with Coppola, radicalizes this notion by locating several translocations of soul in the long march through the short century. This strategy is musically anti-essentialist, to be sure; but that is a given; a trivial task, even. The imperative of Mathison and his colleagues is still more ambitious: to render sonorous moments from the history of the reconstruction of that core of affect, to make audible fragments from the scattering of soul.

We can hear and see this strategy at work in the Black Audio signature of suspended time. The moment is recognizable in each of their films when the montage and chronology gives way to reverie, to a slow space of intensive visual pleasure. In *Twilight City*, the camera floats through tableaux that stage the photo-rituals of Rotimi Fani-Kayode. In *Who Needs A Heart*, the pose of the nighttime world is halted by the high seriousness of actress Caroline Burkhardt's voicing Wilhelmina Fernandez's "My Lord, What A Morning."

Seven Songs for Malcolm X is composed from tableaux shot with anamorphic lens, filtered in blue. A stentorian chorale that announces a solemnity far from the popular heralds scenes from the biography of Malcolm X. It heralds martyrological moments of slanted enchantment, memento mori from the death of civil rights.

In *Handsworth Songs*, the suspension of narrative may be understood as the first in a series of installations from an imaginary museum whose space-times emerge, film by film, one room at a time. Here, a weightless camera moves through a darkened, emptied space lit by suspended photographs, a space that prefigures the recent work of the artist Carrie Mae Weems. It inspects hanging images adding up to an inventory of moments from a postwar history of Caribbean formality and intimacy. Throughout, Mathison uses the synthesizer music for its inorganicism, its distance from warmth and tactility. He favors its potential for intrusion and brutality.

Accordingly, *Handsworth's* tranquil scene of installation is broached by grinding stabs of inharmonic noise that intrude awkwardly at odds with the formal photographs of couple posed stiffly for a wedding, a boy posing with his Chopper bike, a Union Jack pendant stuck in the handlebars. The image used on the poster for *Handsworth Songs* is of an ink-blue-tinted archive of a woman, face frozen in blank dejection, pulling a lever on the assembly line. What you hear within the film itself is the woman

Testament, Man in Water, 1988, BAFC Films



locked into the inharmonic arms of industry.

From the outset, it was audible that BAFC were haunted by the phantasms of revolution. If *Testament* is concerned with the aftermath of African socialism, *Who Needs A Heart* is complicated by the phantasies of revolutionary belonging. In *Handsworth Songs*, the archive is recomposed according to Adrian Sherwood's dub reggae version of "Jerusalem". Its triumphalism, as Mercer realized, is subjected to the untimely logic of dub as subtraction. In *Who Needs A Heart*, the notion of the biographical itself is recomplified by the phantoms of liberation. "If we compose music," Luciano Berio, wrote "we are also composed by music, by situations that constantly challenge us."⁹

The film's elusive center—drug dealer, rent collector, and badman Michael de Freitas turned activist Michael X turned cultural nationalist Michael Abdul Malik becomes the uncertainty principle that founds the film's audacious sound/vision schism. Fictional episodes orbit around fragments of archival footage in a partially silent movie where dialogue is sometimes muted and new jazz music stands in. Michael X appears in archival fragments, episodes from a decade of de/revolution. Each time we see him, he is someone else, a chameleonic figure, beard lengthening with the years.

In 1963, he is a rent collector pursued down Paddington High Street by an indignant British reporter, by 1965, a nationalist under the spell of Malcolm X, by 1968 escorting Stokely Carmichael around London, in 1969, seen on the construction site of The Black House complex, in 1972, at an airport in Trinidad, under arrest for a murder at his commune in Grenada, finally hanged in 1975.

Around the revoiced and scored footage of this disreputable figure, *Who Needs A Heart* threads fictions, episodes, from the lives of a group of artist friends, painters, a photographer, a pianist, a singer, a journalist. They are not so much characters as extensions of his nervous system; as he changes, so they change, in sympathetic resonance with him. Too unstable to be figures, they are variations on Michael X considered as an absent theme. Satellites in an eccentric orbit. Flippant yet earnest, superficial yet sincere, frivolous and serious by turn, they are poseurs committed to sensation.

BAFC's entire drive is to deflect the biographical impulse and replace it with an aesthetic capable of generating contingency. "The aim," Akomfrah stated in 1992, "was to find a way of privileging nuance and gesture over character."¹⁰ As a conman who exploited the hard-won racial consciousness mobilized by civil rights and decolonization, de Freitas embodied the disenchantment with Black Power. Through his penchant for white aristocratic women a program for urban liberation becomes confused with rich white patronage famously dissected by Tom Wolfe in *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. By playing on political sympathies for criminal returns, Michael X drew militancy into a delicate game of duplicity and flirtation understood largely through the lens of white ambivalence.

The very idea of British Black Power emerges as a pathetic copy of an American model. "So is British Black Power all about going to parties?" a white journalist indignantly demands of Louis, the unstable painter turned militant. It is an amazing moment in which white tradition seeks to defend the seriousness of Black Power from itself and then to separate that politics from its erotic implications. At this point where the erotic, the political, the financial, and the fashionable overlap, left critics tend to defensiveness. The appetite for embarrassment is usually reserved for gloating neocons like Wolfe and V. S. Naipaul. What



Three Song on Pain, Time and Light, 1996, BAFC Films

is striking is how Akomfrah and scriptwriter Edward George relish the theatre of embarrassment. One intertitle reads, "Michael builds a Black House with white money." Jack, Louis's faithful white photographer buddy, asks Faith's question: "What did Black Power ever do for me?" In building on the resources of embarrassment, BAFC overturn the inevitability of the history film. The costume drama gains a disconcerting contingency.

To restore becoming to history means dissolving the assumptions that preserve teleology. History thereby becomes inseparable from fashion. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno wrote "Fashion is one of the ways in which historical change affects the sensory apparatus and through it works of art, in minimal traits, often hidden from themselves."¹¹ The pose becomes unknowable in advance from the authentic, the prospect of revolution from the revolt into style. Akomfrah explained the implications of this in 1992. "I told the actors we were making a silent film to get them to focus on the before and after action—this suited the new jazz impulses of the film and gave us a discarded [QUERY: SOMETHING MISSING HERE?] in biographical films in the drive for the significant."¹²

Mathison's genius was to create a new jazz score that could allow moments of telling insignificance to emerge through the film's final mix. As Akomfrah stated, "We were convinced that sound itself had a gaze, a way of constructing a look, and I think *Who Needs A Heart* is probably the best way we've found so far of substantiating that thesis."¹³ The double strategy of muteness and musicality creates a dialectic of habit and chance. Periodically muting dialogue screens off the characters. At these moments of inaudibility, their behavior appears artificial, gestures mannered, postures exaggerated. It is as if their clothes wear them. They become puppets at the mercy of a Zeitgeist that uses them up and wears them out.

Mathison's score includes Eric Dolphy, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Roland Kirk, Max Roach, and the Lamas and Tibetan Monks of the Four Great Orders, as well as the new jazz of Anthony Braxton, Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and The Art Ensemble of Chicago. It is a musical character script that connotes headiness, rashness, sobriety, reserve, cunning, mawkishness, triumph, and fear. All at once.

Instead of traditional cinema, where emotional states are underlined in order to steer the action through a psychological-



Who needs a Heart, 1995, BAFC Films

ly coherent landscape, the cues from Braxton, Coleman, and Coltrane evoke harmonious discord and tempered dissonance, an era in which beauty and ugliness exist in an incongruous unity. The hushed prayerful vocalisms of Anthony Braxton's (840m) *Realise 44m*, tint the air with foreboding in Millie's departure from hospital. In the liner notes to his 1968 debut *Three Compositions for New Jazz*, Braxton wrote "We are on the verge of the fall of Western values."¹⁴

Precisely because of its rethinking of jazz composition, new jazz has dated but is not yet exhausted. On the contrary, its anticipation of unfulfilled liberation, stated boldly by Braxton, thereby retains its potential that popular forms have long since exhausted.

The double flutes of John Coltrane's and Pharoah Sanders lend the Black House archive scene a desolate calm before the storm while the squalling, sliding violin on Ornette Coleman Trio's "Snowflakes and Sunshine" intrudes as Millie pays her rent. It amplifies her unstable state of mind but also blocks her out altogether.

It is striking for its panic—created through fast tempos and imprecise pitch. Equally important is that David Izenson plays bass and Ed Blackwell's drums which play independent rather than accompanying lines.

Signatures of new jazz included independence of instrumental line, imprecision of pitch, loosening of the drum from its role of keeping time, improvisation as composition in real time. All these sonic processes implied the production of a group subjectivity that proposed new kinds of collectivity

The listener is simultaneously deaf to dialogue and open to music. We hear the silence and the song. *Who Needs A Heart* is set in a world where music never quite coincides with mood.

If the London of *Who Needs A Heart* is a terrain of contrary logic that mocks motivation and ironizes explanation, *Testament* evokes Ghana as a present overrun by absences and disavowals.

Testament adopts the same double strategy of muting and sonorizing the archival image as *Who Needs A Heart*, but to strikingly distinct ends. Its role here is informed by ideas of the collapsed metropolis and how time, space, and people inhabit and

navigate a zone of willed forgetting.

In sourcing sequences from Penderecki's *Magnificat*, Part's *Fratres* and *Cantos to the Memory of Benjamin Britten*, Mathison does more than edit first-degree sonic material to resonate with the traumatic collapse of the Nkrumahist socialist project.

The score is more detailed than that. Audiovisualization here creates episodes of intense emotional transcendence in which the fabric of mediated history is torn before one's ears. The archive is muted even as the orchestral sequences well up to fill the void.

Deprived of its official voice, the archival image expands with the thickened, turbid textural expanse of Penderecki's string section. Silenced figures glide through an aural world of terrible change, heightened by a force majeure they cannot hear, by the melancholy they cannot but embody.

Something has gone terribly wrong; the *Magnificat* immerses the listener in the expanded scale of history gone awry. One sees first of all, tinted orange, darkened brightness, burnt sienna, archival footage slowed down, politicians emerging from detention, watched by policemen, smiling into the sunlight of the new regime.

Secondly, the reverse: Nkrumah's men, the Convention People's Party (CPP), the new detainees, exiting from cars, walking toward the darkened door, hoisting the load of kente cloth on their shoulders, faces set as they stoop, to exit history.

In *Testament*, Mathison uses Penderecki and Part to displace scale. To listen to the image one sees is to experience a dimensional transformation in which one's sense of space is reconfigured. The dimensions of mediated memory expand into an archival sublime that dwarfs the listener.

One is immersed in the paradoxical sensation of luxurious misery, suffused with the momentousness of events, of world-history going awry, massaged by feelings of dynamic momentum and inexplicable power.

Mathison scores Ghanaian political trauma through Central European political trauma. This delicate procedure cannot be explained through a reference to the naïve notion that Mathison "Africanizes" Part, nor by stating that BAFC discovers the third world (Ghana) within the first world (Estonia/Hungary).

Testament does not postulate an equivalence between these events so much as it dares to draw an elective affinity of posthumous fatality. Suspended between the military overthrow of

Nkrumahist socialism in Ghana on 24 February 1966 and the Central European tonalities emergent from the post-Soviet imperial landscape, *Testament* explores the trauma of temporality gone astray.

In the violent reorientation of the liberation narrative, the conditions of being and time themselves are destroyed. Abena, the heroine/former activist turned television presenter of *Testament* and her fellow apparatchiks at the Winneba Ideological Institute understood themselves as vanguardists, as the agents of history, incarnating the Convention People's Party's, Ghana's and eventually the United States of Africa's onward march to freedom.

The military coup destroys the chain of equivalence between groupuscle and party, between state and history, between Nkrumah and Destiny. This is what Abena means when she states that "In those days everyone believed that two bodies could become one."¹⁵

She means that then, the total identification of self with the Party, of individual consciousness with collective consciousness, of agency with Future, of being with time, ontology with praxis.

To be a vanguardist is to turn one's back on tradition, to invest all one's effort into building a socialist tomorrow. Once the military coup expels the activist from that tomorrow, they become stranded in a treacherous present, beached on the sands of the hostile Now.

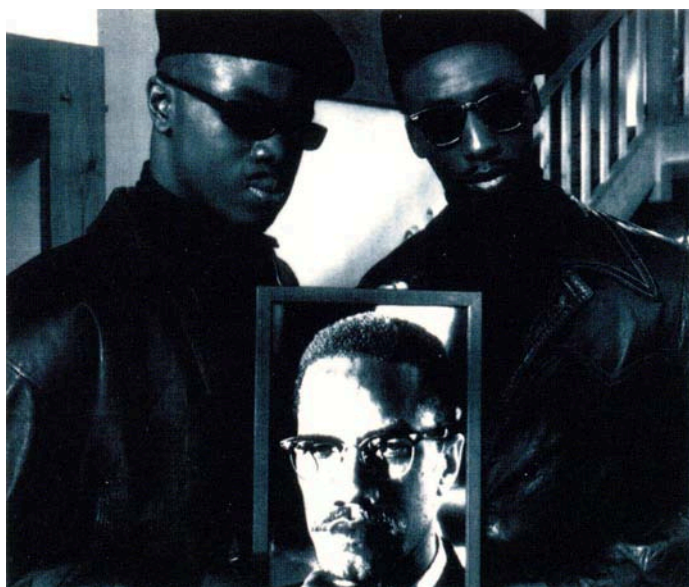
With the future blocked and the past inaccessible, the vanguard becomes yesterday's wo/man, mocked by hope, tormented by the grand narrative that recedes forever, heartsore from the tomorrow that bends away from anticipation.

In *Testament*, all the activists have found different remedies—Islam, the lottery, and silence. Only Abena, adrift in a landscape of memories, slips into a prolonged internal staring, not at life but into herself.

To return to the event through the image and in so doing to use the image to provoke new events: in refashioning the documentary into an untimely meditation, the Black Audio Film Collective created a politics of the image that simultaneously functioned as a new image of politics.

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The Last Angel of History, 1995, BAFC Films



Notes

¹ Kobena Mercer, "Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora Based Blackness," *Third Text*, 49, 1999–2000, p. 57

² "Spaces of Translation: Isaac Julien in conversation with Constanze Ruhm" *Camera Austria*, 72, 2002.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert JC Young, *White Mythologies* (New York: Routledge, 1991)

⁵ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2000)

⁶ Robert JC Young, *PostColonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2001)

⁷ Derrida in Ibid., p. 41

⁸ *Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA Document, 1987

⁹ Berio in Jacques Attali, *Noises: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985)

¹⁰ "Black and White: John Akomfrah's *Who Needs a Heart* and Michael X," *Sight and Sound*, May 1992, p. 31

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

¹² Akomfrah, p. 31

¹³ Akomfrah, p. 31

¹⁴ Anthony Braxton, *Three Compositions of Jazz*. Delmark, 1968

¹⁵ Black Audio Film Collective, *Testament*. 1988