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“Invention in the Name of Community”: Workshops, the Avant-Garde and The Black Audio Film Collective

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Abstract

The Black Audio Film Collective was formed in the neighbourhood of Hackney, London, England in 1982. Along with other African and Caribbean diasporic filmmaking workshops such as Ceddo and Sankofa, The Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) were representatives of a growing, grant-funded cultural film sector in London. Throughout their 16-year history, they pursued their principle aims by working within a specific infrastructure that incorporated workshop practice as a means of disseminating an Afrodiasporic formal language and creating a critical discourse that redefined the notions of race and representation within the cinematic avant-garde. This paper will explore The Black Audio Film Collective's role within an institutional form of avant-garde practice, their emphasis on workshop education and the development of a specifically black diasporic film form, and the reception of their work within a black critical discourse.

Keywords

Black Audio Film Collective, BAFC, African diasporic filmmaking, Cinematic avant-garde

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"Invention in the Name of Community": Workshops, the Avant-Garde and The Black Audio Film Collective

by Josh Romphf

The Black Audio Film Collective was formed in the neighbourhood of Hackney, London in 1982. Its founding members were John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Claire Joseph, and Trevor Mathison. Throughout the collective's 16-year lifespan, only two principle members had changed; Claire Joseph had left the group and David Lawson had joined it. Along with other African and Caribbean diasporic filmmaking workshops such as Ceddo and Sankofa, The Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) were representatives of a growing, grant-funded cultural film sector in London. The Ethnic Minorities Committee was created in 1981 as a response to riots and increasing racial tension within Thatcher-era England. The Black Arts Division, a subsidiary of the EMC, was subsequently created in order to fund black cultural projects (Fusco 137). Britain's film production union, the Association of Cinematograph Television & Allied Technicians, instituted the Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration in 1981. Through these two institutions and the help of Britain's Channel 4, the BAFC were able to become a franchised workshop in 1986. Before this change occurred, the BAFC functioned as a co-operative under the rules of the Institute of Common Ownership Movement (Dickinson 309- 316). In these formative years, the BAFC released a manifesto written by John Akomfrah. In the manifesto, Akomfrah underlined the three principle aims of the collective:

Firstly, to attempt to look critically at how racist ideas and images of black people are structured and presented as self-evident truths in cinema... secondly, to develop a 'forum' for disseminating available film techniques within the independent tradition and to assess their pertinence for black cinema... thirdly, the strategy was to encourage means of extending the boundaries of black film culture. (Akomfrah 144)

Throughout their 16-year history, The Black Audio Film Collective pursued their three principle aims by working within a specific infrastructure that incorporated workshop practice as a means of disseminating an Afrodiasporic formal language and creating a critical discourse that redefined the notions of race and representation within the cinematic avant-garde. This will be explored through The Black Audio Film Collective's role within an institutional form of avant-garde practice, their emphasis on workshop education and the development of a specifically black, diasporic film form, and the reception of their work within a black critical discourse.

From its inception, the historical cinematic avant-garde had aligned itself against mainstream criticism and practice. Despite these romanticized oppositional tendencies, experimental filmmaking is still tethered to and "contained within First World and colonialist culture" (Williamson 108). Barring its acceptance of sexual minorities, the traditional avant-garde has largely excluded all other forms of minority, including ethnic minorities. This is not a conscious exclusion, but is instead one that has perhaps risen from material conditions. In short, cameras, film, and processing cost money. The

faltering job market and racial inequalities experienced by most diasporic cultures throughout the twentieth century would have greatly affected their ability to make films, no matter how small the budget. In the 1970s and 1980s, experimental film, which had largely been known as a form of white, male filmmaking practice, had also become a form of academic, institutionalized filmmaking practice. In his essay “The Academy and the Avant-Garde: A Relationship of Dependence and Resistance”, Michael Zryd explores the incorporation of North American avant-garde film into the film studies canon, and how this directly affects filmmakers and co-operatives (Zryd 17). The academic and institutional world has essentially kept avant-garde film alive through grant-funding, rental fees paid to co-ops, and the employment of practicing filmmakers. While his analysis is strictly based within a North American context, it is possible to apply this train of thought to the filmmaking institutions that were functioning around the time of the BAFC’s inception.

The London Film-Makers’ Co-op (now known as LUX) was the first British filmmaking workshop dedicated to experimental film production. Founded in 1966, The London Film-Makers’ Co-op stressed collective workshops and film production. The London Film-Makers’ Co-op also held close ties to the academic world, for instance, Malcolm Le Grice taught at the St. Martins School of Art and Peter Gidal held a teaching position at the Royal College of Art (Curtis 32). This connection to the academic world helped to foster film works that were grounded in critical art theory, and furthered the notion of “integrated practice”, which maintained a close relationship between the communication, education, exhibition, and production of experimental films (Curtis 34). The model of “integrated practice” set by the London Film-Makers’ Co-op was an influence on several workshops and co-operatives that sprouted up following the Workshop Declaration of 1981. Initially, the London Film-Makers’ Co-op was able to survive on membership fees alone. As the Co-op grew more elaborate, it “became enshrined in workshop revenue funding agreements” (Curtis 34). This tie to both ACTT and Channel 4 had created an interesting national connection between the Co-op and the institution. In Peter Wollen’s essay “The Two Avant-Gardes”, he explores the dichotomy between British Co-op based filmmaking and the French, political essay filmmaking of Jean-Luc Godard’s Dziga Vertov Group. For Wollen, the two differ in many ways: “aesthetic assumptions, institutional framework, type of financial support, type of critical backing, historical and cultural origin” (Wollen 92). The idea of historical and cultural origin is of utmost importance to this discussion. The historical avant-garde has largely been based around notions of internationalism through its wide-ranging exhibition network spanning collectives, film festivals, museums, and universities. In distinguishing the two forms of avant-garde filmmaking in Europe during the 1960s and the 1970s, Peter Wollen creates an almost national discourse, separating British Co-op based filmmaking and French essay filmmaking from North American (predominantly American) modes of filmmaking. He also mentions the institutional and economic frameworks in which the “two avant-gardes” have received support. The funding for the Co-op movement was largely rooted within the institutional art world, whereas the funding for the French avant-garde was connected to the commercial system (Wollen 103). Both of the “two avant-gardes” can be seen as influential in the formation of the BAFC. John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison had been members of The London Film-

Makers' Co-op, and the BAFC also held some of their first screenings there (Dickinson 312). Perhaps this form of "integrated practice" had greatly influenced the principle aims of the BAFC. Aesthetically, however, the films of the BAFC are reminiscent of the political essay films created by the French avant-garde, as John Akomfrah often referred to the Collective as "the bastard children of 1968" (Dickinson 312).

The BAFC did not become a franchised workshop until 1986, after the success of *Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah, 1986). Their attempts at obtaining funding through institutions such as the BFI and the Arts Council were fruitless because of the middle ground they inhabited between Sankofa's cultural politics and the London Film-Makers' Co-Op's conceptual formalism. For them, ideas of race and nation lied within the question of cinematic language. In a May 1996 interview with Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain 1945-90 author Margaret Dickinson, John Akomfrah described the difficult position the BAFC held within the institutional framework of workshop-based avant-garde:

I remember at the Arts Council being told that you couldn't have a black experimental film group, and I think there was an idea that there was already an established way of making films which black film-makers were simply going to provide new characters for. So, white film-makers made film about, I don't know, avant-garde constructivism and black film groups would make things about carnival- and because we kept in the foreground the question of form and experimentation, I think at times we made people uneasy. (Dickinson 312)

It was readily apparent that the BAFC had embodied a niche market of cinematic practice and critical aims that differed from the other black filmmaking workshops at the time. Their philosophy saw them moving towards a notion of black internationalism that involved creating "an infrastructure- journals, seminars, courses, a debate around the cinema, in other words, an audience" (Eshun 82). The purpose of their workshop, in line with the first and second principle aims laid out in their manifesto, was to create such an infrastructure. In a sense, the aesthetic aims of their workshops and films lie in the establishment of a truly black form of cinematic codification. Through training in the technical aspects of filmmaking, there is a re-appropriation of the filmic means of production. The lens that once took a colonizing, exploitative, and derogatory view can be harnessed to form a new representation, a new signified. This practice would entail utilizing the questions of representation and subjectivity as "constitutive of the politics of decolonization" (Hall 19). In a sense, the films of the BAFC explore representation and subjectivity by addressing "blackness" not as a homogenous identity, but as a heterogeneous identity. This can help to explain the aesthetic discourse of the BAFC, as their work takes on multiple techniques in order to frame the heterogeneous history of not only the African diaspora in Britain, but other African diaspora displaced throughout the world. Cultural Studies critic Paul Gilroy adheres that "there can be no pure, uncontaminated or essential blackness anchored in an unsullied originary moment" (Gilroy 99). In other words, there cannot be a clear, singular definition and origin of "blackness", just as there cannot be a clear, singular black identity. This explains the plurality of voices and forms at work in *Handsworth Songs*, *Who Needs a Heart* (John

Akomfrah, 1991), and *7 Songs for Malcolm X* (John Akomfrah, 1993). This once again ties into the collective processes of filmmaking adopted by the BAFC.

Handsworth Songs was the first film produced by the BAFC following the two performance pieces *Expeditions: Signs of Empire* (1983) and *Images of Nationality* (1984). The film explores the race riots that took place in Handsworth, Birmingham in 1985. As opposed to straight documentary realism, the film takes on an essayist format, flowing between traditional documentary footage, interviews, and poetic interludes. The re-appropriation of cinematic form in *Handsworth Songs* functions to “deconstruct the hegemonic voices of British television newsreels” (Auguiste 157). Directly opposed to the didactic forms of documentary representation found in the newsreels, *Handsworth Songs* undermines the aims of such footage by creating a sense of ambiguity as opposed to clarity. For instance, the purpose of television news is to “get to the bottom” of something and inform the public. In a sense, television news and documentaries strive for closure; they attempt to find the most obvious cause of a given problem. *Handsworth Songs* utilizes a diverse array of cinematic techniques to re-evaluate the causes and circumstances surrounding the Handsworth riots. One singular mode of aesthetic discourse does not authenticate an entire black diasporic identity. The aesthetics of the film are as diverse as the British use of the word “black” as an all encompassing form of political identification. This reiterates the purpose of the BAFC’s second aim; the harnessing of multiple techniques that have been grounded in fiction and non-fiction filmmaking can be seen as a means to reassess their “pertinence for black cinema”. It is the synthesis of these techniques that helps to create a new black British formal language.

Who Needs a Heart? furthers the BAFC’s experimentation with form into the realm of the narrative and the “docudrama”. The film explores the relatively short rise and fall of the Black Power movement in Britain through the documentation of a fictional group of activists and supporters of Black Power leader Michael X (Michael de Freitas). The film mixes the aesthetics of British Social Realist films with the sparse (in comparison to *Handsworth Songs*) usage of archival footage. What distinguishes *Who Needs a Heart?* from other black Social Realist films, such as Horace Ové’s *Pressure* (1976), is the fact that it features virtually no dialogue and a complex temporal structure. The film begins in the year 1972, when Michael X was tried and convicted for murder. The film then backtracks to 1965 when the group first met. The remainder of the film details their activities throughout the chronology of Britain’s Black Power movement. The majority of the film’s plot takes place within the meeting spaces of activists, who converse and interact in pantomime. The film’s lack of dialogue once again reiterates the difficulty of historical representation surrounding black diasporic British history. When attempting to scour the archives and set up interviews for information surrounding Michael X, the BAFC found that there was little available compared to the rich documentation on his predecessor, Malcolm X (Marks 54). This motivated their decision to make the film’s characters largely silent, save for a few instances of voice-over narration. The only other dialogue heard in the film comes from archival newsreel footage documenting Michael X and the Black Power movement. A complex relationship forms between the directness of the newsreel footage and the ambiguity of the film’s narrative. For the BAFC, there is no “intact oral history out there waiting to be tapped,

recorded, and proffered to a community" (Marks 56). Rather, the film focuses on the gestures, activities, and interactions of a community that may or may not represent Michael X and his movement as a whole, hence reiterating the multiplicity of histories, identifications, and representations surrounding the British Black diaspora. In a discussion held at the 38th Robert Flaherty Seminar, John Akomfrah described The Black Audio Film Collective's process of recollection through filmmaking: "we don't claim a personal history. We uncover another body: not a solitude, but a set of ideas" (Marks 57).

Seven Songs for Malcolm X does not focus entirely on the figure of Malcolm X himself, but around a "set of ideas" that inform the representation of his legacy. Commissioned by Channel 4, the film was broadcast during the opening week of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) in London, setting "itself up against a hegemonic representation... an increasing desire not to set the record straight but to *thwart* positive knowledge" (Marks 60). Once again the Black Audio Film Collective experiment with the documentary format, balancing an almost didactic talking-head approach with archival footage and highly-stylized tableaux. This portrayal of Malcolm X, or rather the context surrounding him, differentiates from the linear progression of Lee's film. The tableaux sequences establish this difference, as they represent "personification held in a suspended state of emblematic temporality" (Eshun 85). In other words, their stillness functions as a means of meditation and reflection not only on the life of Malcolm X, but on the effect he has had on those that are interviewed. Most importantly, the tableaux call attention to themselves, as they disrupt the narrative progression of the documentary through their stillness and artifice, reiterating the first principle aim of the BAFC, which was to question the role of racist images in the cinema as "self-evident truths". The tableaux in the film function as a new form of framing the black identity. These sequences are free of movement and narrative action. Throughout the film, they are labelled as subjective dream sequences experienced by Malcolm X, lending them a fantastical quality, blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction.

The third principle aim of The Black Audio Film Collective was to "extend the boundaries of black film culture" (Akomfrah 144). The Collective attempted to establish a critical discourse on the "complexity of black portrayal in films" through screening series such as "Cinema and Black Representation" (Akomfrah 145). These series, in conjunction with various technical workshops, functioned to foster a critically engaged group of black filmmakers who could not only dissect conventional films in terms of their representations of race and ethnicity, but who also had the means to create films with *new* representations. The earlier films (especially *Handsworth Songs*) produced by the BAFC also helped to inform a new brand of film criticism through the complex polarities of their reception. The creation of a new formal language also required critics who could understand and, of course, criticize it. According to Michael Zryd, "in the narrative feature world, academic criticism goes largely unnoticed, but it is crucial to the avant-garde" (Zryd 32). In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, Kobena Mercer explains that the influence of European and American avant-garde cinema on the black British workshop films "suggests an underlying anxiety to pin down and categorize a practice that upsets and disrupts fixed expectations and normative assumptions about what black films should look like" (Mercer 55). As a result of the

material circumstances outlined at the beginning of this essay, non-mainstream black film criticism would not have existed considering that there were very few underground or experimental films made by black diasporic filmmakers. This is a factor that raised a specific problem facing the critics of black films in general and the critics of black avant-garde films in particular: because of a noted absence of black films, there is a certain propensity for critics to automatically assume that they are good (Williamson 108). Judith Williamson also outlines another critical dichotomy that must be taken into consideration when viewing these films, and that is the assumption that “realist, narrative, mainstream cinema = bad; non-narrative, difficult, even boring, oppositional cinema = good” (Williamson 108). The avant-garde, especially after the explosion and decline of underground cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, has occupied a small, niche market at best. As a result of its ties to the academic world, it is often assumed that only cinephiles, academics or “intellectuals” watch and enjoy these films. Given the relative popularity of films such as *Handsworth Songs*, this once again complicates The Black Audio Film Collective’s situation within the avant-garde, as well as their situation within British national cinema as a whole.

The films of The Black Audio Film Collective deal explicitly with what Stuart Hall has called “the burden of black representation,” which is “the impossible attempt to speak on behalf of ‘the black community’ as if any singular object exists” (Hall 13). Recognizing this difficulty, their films employ a range of aesthetic techniques that attempt to define the conflicts involved with the construction of a distinctly black diasporic historical identity. With help from the Workshop Declaration of 1981, The Black Audio Film Collective was able to approach the question of black representation from multiple angles: through the production of their own films, through technical workshops that helped to redefine a black cinematic language, and through critical lectures that explored and deconstructed existing iterations of black representation in the cinema. With their ties to the institutional grant-based system, it is difficult to say whether or not The Black Audio Film Collective would have existed without state funding. By 1991, the era of workshop funding had largely been exhausted. In 1992, following the production of *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*, The Black Audio Film Collective’s contracts had run out, and they began financing their films through straight commissions (Dickinson 313). Following The Black Audio Film Collective’s disbanding in 1998, John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, and David Lawson formed the successful production company Smoking Dogs Films. It is not certain whether The Black Audio Film Collective achieved their three principle aims over their 16-year existence, but their body of work is representative of an era that will likely never be repeated. As arts funding dries up and distribution becomes scarce, experimental film is once again growing increasingly individualistic. From this perspective, The Black Audio Film Collective’s trajectory grows even more impressive.

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