

**Film and Video Series.** From 2 to 16 July 2014, 7 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

# Sounds in Diaspora

## The Cinema of the Black Audio Film Collective



MUSEO NACIONAL  
CENTRO DE ARTE  
REINA SOFIA

  
GOBIERNO  
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO  
DE EDUCACIÓN, CULTURA  
Y DEPORTE

“Some time ago I found myself in London in search of the Black Audio Film Collective, because I had to return two VHS tapes that they had lent me. But I could never find the place (...). These tapes remain among all my clutter, like some kind of remorse, together with the memory of that great work I would like to pay homage to (...).”<sup>1</sup> These words by Chris Marker reflect the current situation of the Black Audio Film Collective, consigned to isolated appearances and commentaries about a historic body of work lurking the mist of lost memory. Active between 1982 and 1997 in the UK, there are countless reasons to dedicate a film series to the collective, founded by John Akomfrah, Reese Auguiste, Lina Gopaul, Trevor Mathison, David Lawson, Edward George and Clare Joseph, a multidisciplinary team made up of film-makers, sound artists, activists, sociologists and producers, all Britons from Dominica, Jamaica, Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago. Such reasons could include the mention of the horizontal work it distributed, among both its members and its audience, or the overhaul of realist documentary making through the display of colonial imagery and representations originating from archive, and, most importantly, the capacity to articulate a common front, encompassing a large part of the New Left approaches that not only questioned identity hegemony during the years of Thatcherism, but also examined culture, and particularly cinema, as the key element of resistance.

Nonetheless, beyond these reasons there is an accentuated cause that grants the Black Audio Film Collective a foundational place in the audiovisual history of recent decades; more than just a film project, the Black Audio Film Collective put together an aesthetic programme focused on updating the

revolutionary approaches of Third Cinema, which emerged in Latin America and Africa during the decolonisation process in the 1960s and 70s, from metropolitan central Europe, starting in the 1980s. Accepting its potency, but also its limits and shortcomings, this approach would be radically reformulated into a new discursive space predominated by archive research and the integration of aural culture in the moving image as it strove to question and allude to the path of a decentralised subject with no place; in short, a language of diaspora.

“For us, Third Cinema is something that sees the most gargantuan cultural, scientific and artistic manifestation of our time in this (anti-imperialist) struggle, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality from all peoples: the decolonisation of culture,”<sup>2</sup> this was how Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino described a movement that, adopting the manifestos *The Aesthetics of Hunger* by Glauber Rocha and *For an Imperfect Cinema* by Julio García Espinosa, would spread throughout the whole of Latin America, Africa and Asia, and would persevere in a healthy collective network until well into the 1980s. Third Cinema articulated global imagery of resistance based on the dialectic tension between the coloniser/colonised, empire/nation and capitalism/socialism, after which it revealed the search for an innocent, not contaminated, origin, an ostensible zero degree in the construction of decolonised national identity. The Black Audio Film Collective may receive claims of being Third Cinema, but question how to incorporate it into a much more complex mixed identity related to a new place of enunciation, yet also with the assumption that – adhering to Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*<sup>3</sup> – emancipation and exploitation are

two inseparable effects of the modern experience. The tactics of confrontation and opposition in film-makers such as Med Hondo, Santiago Álvarez and Masao Adachi, to name three examples of such disparate geographical areas as Senegal, Cuba and Japan, would become a broader project with two main goals. The first, the use of film as a key element to articulate another public sphere geared towards changing cultural and educational institutions through the notion of difference and representation; the second, the thought of a nomadic and cosmopolitan post-colonial identity, as opposed to the global and nationalist one in Third Cinema, where the moving image must adapt a visual form that encompasses modernity and its reverse from the palimpsest of multiple stories and narrative time periods that approach the present. Or, according to the poetry of Derek Walcott, how to think about the present moment from “the absence of ruins”.

Therefore, in 1984, the year their first film production *Expeditions* was released, the collective founded the Association of Black Workshops, eight permanent workshops that, under the name *Visions and Revisions*, endeavoured to “produce new skills in both practice and theory”, in the words of Edward George<sup>4</sup>, in order to be contextualised in internal network and structure systems that upheld *independent black culture*. It cannot be forgotten that this mobilization occurred at a time when any and every public service of the State – particularly cultural – was being withdrawn and privatised, thus giving rise to institutional reinvention and creation from the bottom. Lina Gopaul, another of the collective’s members, wrote how this “new sector of black cinema is the culmination of different desires, strategies and modes of intervention in film production”<sup>5</sup>, appealing to a time of

collaboration that enabled a consideration of occupation and the debate around the institution as a priority. The idiosyncrasy lies in how this critical discourse would nurture two highly sophisticated movements; one, the nascent film theory in British academia, led by the periodical *Screen*, which featured articles by Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis and Christian Metz and represented the starting point of Lacan, Foucault and Althusser in the analysis of the image and its apparatus. This academic circle, related to the momentum of New Art History, looked to acknowledge and empower a new spectator, capable of recognising themselves in critical analysis when faced with the saturation and determinism in mass media, aspects that Black Audio – we are reminded of the name of their workshops, *Visions and Revisions* – would grant privilege to. The other movement, stretching over the entire filmography of the collective and even continuing through the current work of many of its members, forms the debates of the New Left, with a strong emphasis placed on the voice of Stuart Hall, the founder of visual culture studies and the journal *New Left Review*.

In 1972 the Irish labourer Robert Keenan was mugged by two teenagers of African descent on his way home from the pub in the Handsworth area of Birmingham, an inner city Afro-Caribbean district. This event marked the beginning of a whole campaign of alarm at the growing number of robberies on the working class in the UK. The situation would give rise to *Policing the Crisis*, a study in which Hall condemned the emergence of this panic from a fantasy of evil that strove to replace the old culture of post-war consensus with coercion and repression during the crisis. *Handsworth Songs*, the Black Audio Film Collective’s first feature length film, depicts the outburst of labour protests and race riots

at the beginning of the 1980s in the same neighbourhood of England, and is constructed with news footage and images of representations of slavery, with the narrator repeating the phrase, “There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories”, an inescapable resonance of the conclusions from *Policing the Crisis*.

Hall worked from the CCCS department at the University of Birmingham, the birthplace of cultural studies. To a certain extent, the cinema of the Black Audio Film Collective can be understood as the search for a language of diaspora, born in the crossroads between the genealogy of Third Cinema and the perspective of cultural studies. When faced with the obsolete concept of class struggles, Hall put forward the idea of hegemony, the progressive conquest of pre-eminence through a false consensus; the role of culture was to show discordance and materialise as a space for permanent negotiation, and, from that point, interest in the popular culture theory of power relations. The synthesis between fragments of sound and black music alongside documentary images and archives can be seen in every film by Black Audio, who also attempted to incorporate the popular within a film narration rationale – not dependent on it, but used as an oral conversation and permanent dissension. So much so that *The Last Angel of History*, one of their last productions, is based on the presence of the alien and outer space in the free jazz of Sun Ra (*Space is the Place*, 1972) and the funk of George Clinton (*The Mothership Connection*, 1975), Afro-futurist allusions to black otherness in white societies. “The journey ends,” wrote Stuart Hall, “not in Ethiopia but with the music of Burning Spear and Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song*”.<sup>6</sup> The idea that a black culture does not exist, and much less English or Euro-

pean, without the missed connections in transatlantic migrations, would be a core part in the development of a filmography articulated in the discordant and anachronistic stories of diaspora.

How is this spatial and temporary transit equipped with self-expression? “*Handsworth Songs* was John Grierson speaking about the language of diaspora,” according to Reece Auguiste, a member of the collective; in other words, the documentary movement in Britain and the visual form of an interrupted, collective and yearning memory, linked not only to the past but also to the state of emergency in a present determined by the persistent mechanisms of exclusion. The manifestation of memory, in its absence and presence, interruption and continuity, is the element that allows the documentary mechanism to be reinvented.

*Expeditions*, their first project, with two screenings of slide tapes with a voice-over, is positioned in a space found halfway between museum and cinema. Both series, *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality*, set in motion the collapse of two time periods through intertextuality: the certainty of the British nationalist myth evoked in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial photography is broken up as it is mixed with a mesh of texts and audio that exhibit the ideology of supremacy and conquest. In *Handsworth Songs*, this intertextuality, in such close proximity to post-modern allegory, becomes a palimpsest halfway between documentary records and historical archive, between the appropriation of official news images and the traces of a past of denial that, dialectically speaking, presents violence in the present as an irremediable conclusion. As with the paths of diaspora, that endless relationship Édouard

Glissant<sup>7</sup> spoke of, the palimpsest is a language devoid of significance, with its meaning emerging from the fissures and cracks that form its composition, the idea of archipelago and continent, to go back to Glissant once more. In *Handsworth Songs*, the sampling in the film adds voices, registers and textures that clash with the image. With a narration verging on fable, the voice-over in *Twilight City* spans the geographical area of London in its gradual conversion to a capital of financial gain; the city is represented from a fictitious character in exile, syncopated with interviews with post-colonial theorists and critics such as Homi Bhabha, Kobena Mercer and Paul Gilroy. Fable mixed with chronicle is the way they depict the activist Michael Abdul Malik, whose biography is staged in a series of *tableau vivants*, an element of scenography used in Black Audio's films in the 1990s. *The Last Angel of History*, together with *The Mothership Connection* and *Gangsta Gangsta: The Tragedy of Tupac Shakur*, conclude the series, which, like their filmography as a whole, is dedicated to the popular as a culture of resistance.

- 1 ESHUN, K. and SAGAR, A. (eds.). *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*. FACT and University of Liverpool Press, 2007, p. 12.
- 2 GETTINO, Octavio and SOLANAS, Fernando. "Hacia un tercer cine", en AAVV. *A diez años de "Hacia un Tercer Cine"*. México: Filmoteca, UNAM, 1982, pp. 38 and 39.
- 3 GILROY, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993.
- 4 GEORGE, Edward. "New Directions in Training", in ESHUN, K. and SAGAR, A. Op. cit., pp. 148-150.
- 5 GOPAUL, Lina. "Which Way Forward?", in ESHUN, K. and SAGAR, A. Op. cit., p. 146.
- 6 BLACKBURN, Robin. "Remembering Stuart Hall", an article published in *New Left Review*, March/April 2014, available at <http://newleftreview.org/II/86/robin-blackburn-stuart-hall-1932-2014> [last accessed 10 June 2014].
- 7 GLISSANT, Édouard. *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.

## Program



*Images of Nationality*, 1982-84.

Courtesy of Black Audio Film Collective and Smoking Dogs, London.

Session 1. 2 July, 7 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

### **Signs of Empire**

Colour, sound, 20'50'', 1982-84. Original format: 35mm slides, screening format: Blu-ray.  
Distribution: Smoking Dogs Films

### **Images of Nationality**

Colour, sound, 22'44'', 1982-84. Original format: 35mm slides, screening format: Blu-ray.  
Distribution: Smoking Dogs Films.

Both film projects form *Expeditions*, Black Audio Film Collective's inaugural work approached in two parts. *Expeditions* shares deliberated hermeticism and the use of allegory in art practices from the beginning of the 1980s. *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality* both include familiar aspects in the collective's work: the dimension of sound in the image, the audiovisual remix of archive and the use of text as collective writing. *Signs of Empire* draws from Roland Barthes and his *Empire of Signs*, resolving to show historical signs from colonialism, while *Images of Nationality* addresses the continuity of the myth of the nation.

## Program

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*Handsworth Songs*, 1986.

Courtesy of Black Audio Film Collective and LUX, London.



*Twilight City*, 1989.

Courtesy of Black Audio Film Collective and Smoking Dogs, London.

**Session 2.** 3 July, 7 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

### ***Handsworth Songs***

Colour, sound, 60', 1986. Original format: 16mm film, screening format: Betacam Digital.  
Distribution: LUX.

At the beginning of 1985 a series of race riots and labour protests took place in Handsworth (Birmingham) and Brixton (London), culminating in the death of an elderly black woman and a white policeman. The film joins the civil unrest and a multiple story of dispossession, delving deeper into the roots of contradictions from the colonial past and connecting the economic and industrial crisis at the time. By using the traditions of reformist documentaries in Britain (John Grierson, Humphrey Jennings and Basil Wright), together with archives of black presence (and absence) in the UK, *Handsworth Songs* concludes that any meaning has to be sought outside of news reporting. The *Songs* from the title does not refer to musicality in the film, but instead invokes an updated idea of documentary, devised as a poetic montage of associations.

**Session 3.** 9 July, 7 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

### ***Twilight City***

Colour, sound, 52', 1989. Original format: 16mm film, screening format: Betacam Digital.  
Distribution: Smoking Dogs Films.

An epistolary documentary essay that narrates the story of a young girl in London who writes to her mother on the island of Dominica. Her letters recount the changes occurring in the city while the Docklands are being rebuilt as the film intersperses this social and psychological landscape of the city as a symbolic space in which the transformation of the urban panorama into financial affluence converges with the hopes and disappointments of African diaspora. This intimate space, with echoes of Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, is imbued with debates on the public sphere, where sociologists, activists and historians draw up a new urban territory, mapped out by racial and cultural limits. "A place with people existing in close proximity but living in different worlds," as Paul Gilroy remarks.



*Who Needs a Heart*, 1991.  
Courtesy of Black Audio Film Collective and LUX, London.

**Session 4.** 10 July, 7 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

### ***Who Needs a Heart***

Colour, sound, 78', 1991. Original format: 16mm film, screening format: Betacam Digital.  
Distribution: LUX.

This film, produced by Channel Four, explores the history of British Black Power by means of the blurred figure of Michael Abdul Malik, the predominant counter-culture anti-hero and activist in the movement. Nevertheless, the narration keeps its distance from this historical figure and traces his biography from radio and television documents, complemented with the lives of other participants in the movement. Trevor Mathison's soundtrack is arranged to produce a deliberate estrangement with the images, and *Who Needs a Heart* sets out a fragmented narration that flashes back and jumps forward, bringing in fiction as a "postcolonial chamber theatre", in the words of Kobena Mercer, supporting itself with music, the street and art to reclaim the genealogy of blackness.



*The Last Angel of History*, 1995.  
Courtesy of Black Audio Film Collective and Smoking Dogs, London.

**Session 5.** 16 July, 7 p.m.  
Sabatini Building, Auditorium

### ***The Last Angel of History***

Colour, sound, 52', 1995. Original format: 16mm film, screening format: Betacam Digital.  
Distribution: Smoking Dogs Films.

One of the collective's last and most influential film essays, *The Last Angel of History* concentrates its combination of interests in a highly complex and disparate manner. Located between critical theory and science fiction, the *Data Thief*, a version from Walter Benjamin's story, played by Edward George (a member of the collective), travels into the past to assemble fragments of information that will enable him to decipher the future. The cosmic journey and alien iconography prevalent in the music of Sun Ra, Lee Perry and George Clinton is interpreted as a metaphor of diaspora and the otherness of the black subject in white society. Thus, free jazz and black electronic music imagine a future that is inevitably condemned to the past.

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### Entry to the film and video program:

Free until full capacity is reached

Curatorship and texts

Chema González

Front cover photo

*Handsworth Songs*, 1986.

Image courtesy of Black Audio

Film Collective and LUX, London