

Brief Notes on the BFI Ethnic Film & TV Adviser post

The following Notes offer a very general description of the BFI's new Ethnic Film & Television Adviser post (which I took up last July), and how I see it operating. They are not intended as a policy statement.

1. Whilst it is fair to say that the BFI does not have an Ethnic Policy as such, the creation of the Ethnic Film & TV Adviser post does signal an important shift in thinking which, for the first time, acknowledges the importance of ethnic (Black and 'Third World') film and television culture in the overall cultural work of the Institute. This initiative can be seen partly as an institutional response to the changing social character of the constituency, which now includes a significant ethnic film and video sector, and partly as a positive (political) intervention within the Institute itself, an attempt to take on board 'race relations' issues more centrally, and thus open the way for further initiatives in areas of policy and practice.

2. Many people, both inside and outside the Institute, might still view the 'ethnic post' as tokenistic, designed (consciously or unconsciously) to provide a substitute for long-term and significant change. And there are numerous precedents in 'race relations' to back up their suspicions. But I believe that the possibilities far outweigh the limitations, although the acid test will probably be the extent to which it is possible to actually effect a range of initiatives, in a concrete sense, at all levels of the Institute.

3. The BFI is committed to developing an Equal Opportunity policy, i.e. one that does more than simply announces that 'we are an equal opportunity employer'. Thus one of the functions of the ethnic post will be to provide a focus around which the issues can be mobilised. Fortunately, or hopefully, this task will not rest exclusively on the shoulders of 'the ethnic person', as there are a number of officers

in the Institute who have an expressed commitment to seeing this work through. In fact, certain sections in the Institute, in their separate ways, have been engaged in anti-racist and ethnic/Third World-related activity, and I see this as providing a base on which to develop substantive work in the area.

4. It is essential that ethnic-related initiatives are not confined to marginal 'progressive' elements within the Institute, and that their effects are felt across the structure as a whole. Therefore, we are setting up an inter-departmental liason group - based on the original Ethnic Policy Working Group which was instrumental in formulating the current ethnic adviser post - to look into matters concerning BFI employment patterns, recruitment, training, etc., and to help construct an explicit Equal Opportunity policy. It is envisaged that this group will not only facilitate inter-departmental co-operation, but also provide an effective administrative framework for getting proposals and recommendations through the system.

5. The ethnic post is based in the Directorate and is for a two-year period. The brief is very wide indeed, allowing a high degree of freedom across the whole range of BFI activities. Though it is too early to draw conclusions, I think it's safe to say that the structure of the post provides the kind of flexibility which is necessary, if it is to avoid becoming dangerously marginalised or simply absorbed. Although there is the opposite danger of expecting miraculous changes and, therefore, succumbing to the pressure to spread 'ethnic' interventions so thinly across the Institute, as to render them ineffective - like soap bubbles, interesting but not very substantial.

6. Therefore, different sets of strategies and priorities need to be deployed simultaneously, in order to give some kind of structure to ethnic-related work in the Institute. Some of these, such as the ethnic policy liason group, are be aimed specifically at coping with the internal dynamics of the BFI, while others have more to do with e.g. access, i.e. the idea of the Institute as a resource which black people particularly can utilise more fully and more effectively.

lot of emphasis will in fact be on the latter resource-based initiatives.

7. At present, in terms of developing an 'Ethnic Policy' (if, indeed, that is a priority), we do not believe that a separate 'ethnic committee', made up of e.g. members of the black independent film & video sector, is necessary. Instead, we would argue that black representation on broader policy and funding committees such as the RCC and RPF, which already exists, provides a more effective means of making interventions from outside, although ethnic representation needs to be extended further, to include the Production Board, the Board of Governors, and so on. In that sense, the relationship between my activities and the constituency is more or less informal but utilisable.

8. Whilst BFI support of the black film & video sector needs to be reinforced, there are other non-production areas of ethnic film cultural work which the Institute can play an important role in developing. We intend to focus on several areas of activity, as initial projects aimed at opening up a wider range of access points for ethnic-related work. For example:

Film programming. We are planning two-day workshops, starting early next year, on the nuts-and-bolts of film programming, inc. the mechanics of film hire, publicity, programme planning and costing, and so on. These will be aimed at black practitioners already working in the independent film & video sector, as well as other people who organise ethnic & Third World film programmes in community centres. The workshops - planned for London and a regional venue - are being organised through BFI Distribution and will be led by the department's Regional Programme Advisers.

In addition to giving ethnic practitioners access to some of the specialist knowledge in the area, it is hoped that the workshops will also provide an opportunity for community-based Black & Third World film programmers to exchange ideas and experiences with BFI specialist officers, with whom they would not normally come into

contact. One area of work which we hope will develop out this is some kind of structured research into ethnic audiences in Britain.

Training/Placement Scheme. We are exploring the possibility of a 9-12 months placements, located in different departments in the Institute, where the person(s) would be engaged on specific ethnic/Third World-related projects while acquiring fairly comprehensive skills in a specialist area of the Institute's work. Two are currently being mapped out: one in Distribution (again, with the Regional Programme Advisers), the other with the National Film Archive.

Archiving is a particularly good example of a 'mainstream' specialist activity which can be made relevant to ethnic film culture. Recent work around British social and cultural histories, particularly in the black independent film & video sector, highlights the growing importance of archival material in the re-construction of black histories, and it is likely to increase as more film and video practitioners begin to explore e.g. British colonial history and 'Black people in Britain' themes extensively. One useful project in this context might be to produce a sub-index or catalogue of (British) ethnic-related visual material held in the Archive.

Like the proposed placement in Distribution and, in a slightly different way, the two-day intensive workshops, the scheme centring on film archiving/cataloguing is aimed at creating a pool of knowledgeable ethnic 'specialists' whose skills could be deployed in establishments like the BFI or film and tv companies, or in the independent sector.

Research. There is not a substantial amount of critical or historical work being done in the area of black representations and ethnic film (& television) cultures in this country, at the moment. We consider this a distinct disadvantage, since 'theoretical' work (of various kinds) is actually essential to the development (black) film culture. In this respect, the BFI 'ethnic post', because of its particular profile, offers a chance to address this

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problem more centrally, that is, specifically in terms of generating effective institutional support for research-based initiatives. Part of our main task, therefore, will be to lobby (if necessary) various departments in the Institute (i) to inflect some of their existing work in ethnic-related terms, and (ii) to have a policy of commissioning outside black researchers, etc. to undertake new or specific projects in the field.

9. Needless to say, we are in the awkward position of having to argue for some form of expansion, albeit in the narrower ethnic-related field, in a climate of economic contraction. Though certain policy initiatives can be undertaken without too much strain on existing resources, the implementation of policies and more practical-based initiatives need money which simply does not exist as such within the Institute. Consequently, we are obliged to look into alternative sources of funding for most of the ethnic-related programmes that we hope to develop. The BFI's success in recent years in raising sponsorship money, however, provides real possibilities, which we intend to explore. Again, the BFI ethnic post provides an effective institutional framework not only for arguing these issues through and promoting a range of ethnic-related activities, but also for exploring new sources of financial support for (non-production) areas of ethnic film & tv cultural work.

Jim Pines

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