

Parminder Vir: Head of Race Equality Unit
GLC Recreation and Arts Department

Parminder Vir organised the first Black Film Festival at the Commonwealth Institute. She has been responsible for initiating the Third Eye and Anti Racist Film Programme at the GLC. She was a member of the International Steering Committee who organised the Film Forum held in Nairobi, Kenya as part of the end of Women's Decade Conference. She is presently co-ordinating a programme of films directed by Third World Women for India Festival to be held in January '86.

June Givanni, appointed by GLC Race Equality Unit to co-ordinate Third Eye and Anti Racist Film Programme.

June Givanni and Parminder Vir organised the Anti Racist Film Programme held earlier this year, I went to see them at the GLC's Race Equality Unit to talk to them about the Festival.

'So how did the Anti Racist Film Festival come about?'

P.V. 'Well it has a context and that context is a strategy to develop a Black Independent Film and Video sector. Over the last 3 years we have helped to establish four franchised black film and video workshops; sponsored a series of training courses in film and video production for black people at the National Film and Television School; funded a number of productions some of which have been screened on CH 4 and at international film festivals, these include MAJDAR; ON DUTY; NELSON MANDELA; film on Third Eye. A number of film projects funded by us are in the process of being completed including films by Asian women on Asian women and Different Desires, film by Black Audio Film Collective. As part of this strategy we have also developed an active exhibition programme aimed at promoting films made by Black and Third World filmmakers.

The first Black Film Festival 1982 was a tremendous success. It was held at the Commonwealth Institute and the programme included Black American Independent Filmmakers and Black British Filmmakers. The organisation and success of the Black Film Festival coincided with two other very important developments namely the advent of CH 4 and the GLC with its policies to promote Black Arts.

Third Eye, Festival of Third World Cinema was a follow up to the Black Film Festival. Over 2 weeks we presented in three different venues in London, a showcase of the cinematic language that was being developed. Third Eye was a success both nationally and internationally. A number of films screened as part of Black Film Festival (82) and Third Eye (83) have been picked up by distributors based in London. Thus the objective of making these films available to wider audiences is in some part being realised there is still a major problem related to distribution.

The Anti Racist Film Programme which ran from March to November was designed to build on the audience generated by the previous two programmes and to open up new venues for screening the films. The emphasis of the programme was on the use of films as an educational and campaigning tool. The film programme compiled by an advisory committee made up of filmmakers, educationalist and programmers was taken into schools, community centres and community cinemas.

- ME The Anti Racist Film Festival certainly got a different audience, I went to a showing at St Matthews in Brixton and there was not the usual city limits crowd'.
- JG 'That was what we felt was one of the successes, we wanted the films to reach the community, so we showed the films in venues where people who were not necessarily a cinema going audience felt quite happy about, as they use those venues for other purposes. People came out in quite large numbers to places like St Matthews and The Factory'.
- PV Another important thing was taking the films to outer boroughs, where cinemas have died a real death. We took them to Hounslow, Southall and beyond and again we had good attendance and discussion'.
- ME 'Yes, the discussion struck me as much as the films. The only complaint I have is that the time for discussion was too limited'.
- PV 'The whole point is that the films are a catalyst a centre piece for discussion that will continue outside that space'.
- ME Did you liaise with filmmakers and workshops when organising the festival?'
- PV 'Yes quite closely, independent filmmakers and workshops were hosts to a number of filmmakers we invited for the duration of the festival and they organised seminars themselves. A number of these people also participated in the organising committee'.
- JG 'For example, Eushan Palcy (RUE CASE NEGRES) who we brought here in January, her screenings were packed out in Brixton, The Factory and Wood Green. The discussions were very good, also when she was here, one of the Black workshops organized a seminar with other filmmakers so they could meet and talk with her. People thought that sort of forum to be really useful, and people did get quite used to coming along to those venues to meet and talk with the filmmakers after the film'.
- ME 'It's a shame there can't be a more continual follow up'.
- PV 'I think there is follow up, one of the things we are looking at is the creation of a distribution, promotion network. This would be a central information centre for film i.e. use of film, where to obtain it, as well as organising programmes like the Anti Racist Film Festival and other one off festivals, giving a forum for Black independent filmmakers'.

.. The Anti Racist Film Pack is an important document as well, which helps people in schools to get hold of films to show to students, in a particular context .

ME 'How did the film programme go down in schools?'

JG 'There was some resistance at first, but the schools who did use it found it very useful. When we were trying to schedule schools, what we did was to send them information in the form of the Pack, saying this is what is available to you. Have a look at the film summaries and then we can have a talk about what might be suitable for your purposes or age group.

People have a different conception of how far they wanted to take their anti racist commitment, every school had to make an anti racist statement but they were'nt actually obliged to take it any further.

Some schools had problems with scheduling, teachers convincing heads or heads convincing teachers that space should be made in the curriculum for these things. Some teachers replied that they were unable to make that decision but they were going to do their own thing out of school. One Primary School teacher wanted to introduce a film into a school that was in an NF area. The parents were very racist and it was going to be very difficult, she would have to select very carefully which film could be shown and such resistance existed from the parents, we were unable to do the discussion, it would have to be their teachers.

Very often the teachers themselves are unsure they can handle the response of the children. If they had to discuss with them issues that came out of the film and they're not sure of their own position, it can be very threatening. Young children especially come out with everything that happened to them. Some teacher say 'Oh no, that didn't happen to you' when the kid has talked about a racist encounter within the school. It is the whole power thing.

What the schools actually lack is advice, we are inundated with phone calls'.

'This is it, there is a lot of information that hasn't been made available to people. We are a small staff and people phone us from all over not just London. A woman in Tooting was starting a Parent/Toddler group, to get them interested she wanted to show a film. It makes it possible, 'at least I've got this to start with'. The hope is they will be contacting distributors directly and also the workshops, which I think some people already do'.

'HAIRPIECE'

ME 'I also wanted to talk about the films I saw, from the festival, for instance 'HAIRPIECE' by Ayoka Chenzira, which I thought was very good and funny too, (for those of you who have not seen the film here is a brief review from the festival's programme).

'In the discussion held after the film, Ayoka said there had been some quite violent reactions to the film'.

'Some Black women who had done things to their hair felt that they were being put on the spot. There was somehow the question, that you didn't have a political stance if you straightened your hair or did anything to your hair.

That in itself is wrong, say you had the massive Angela Davis head of hair, that didn't mean that you were necessarily 'right on', you could be as reactionary as hell.

It is like feminists with high heels and the whole works, as far as I'm concerned it's cool, whatever suits you.

PV 'I think she uses hair as a clever device to make a political point about Black people actually beginning to examine ourselves, she could have used other devices to make similar points. A lot of people internalize self hatred and it comes out in various ways, wanting to be this blond, is one'.

JG 'There is so much material that reactionary people if they want to make a particular point can use in a negative way. Like a lot of white teachers the only way they can deal with racism is to say 'It's not just Black and White, it's the Irish too' and they can focus on that. It has to be used quite carefully, it's not something for the white kids to sit and laugh at saying 'You want to be like us, ha ha'. If it's not handled right it could stay at that level'.

'I wonder how 'HAIRPIECE' is understood when shown on American TV, it is animation and kids love animation, but there is no context for them there. Another film which focuses on the internal contradictions is 'COLOUR' where the subject matter is Colour Castism and the whole question of passing for White'.

PV 'To me racism is not about people's attitudes, it is about power... what kind of society one lives in, who has the power'.

JG '...And struggles for it and that is what their lives and their experiences were about. Take that incident in the bar! She came in and there was

.. this guy sitting on the end of the bar, looking at her. She was sitting there and the people in the bar were giving her a hard time, because she was light skinned and the guy was paying her attention. Their reactions to her have a lot to do with everything that happens outside of that situation, they see her as someone who can straddle both sides'.

PV 'It is a real diversion of issues; it suggests let's deal with it by putting everyone on a race awareness training course and assume if they go through this routine, they'll come out brushed and cleaned and no longer racist! It is nonsense, I had this long debate with Denise Oliver (who wrote COLOUR) and it is much more her personal film. She is light skinned and she passes as a chicano as well as a Black American. She can move very easily between the two communities but that's not all it is about. The film does not talk about ideology, it talks about an attitude, this thing about Black passing for White'.

JG 'It does make a comment because passing for Black or White would not mean anything if White wasn't the colour where the power is, it doesn't make any sense otherwise'.

PV 'You and I have that political consciousness but I don't assume that others have it, they watch from the perspective, just as within the Indian community there is the caste system and some people say 'they hate each other'...'they are racist just as much as White people'. The point I am trying to make is it is no good talking about the caste system without looking at the class system. Similarly, it is no good looking at colour casteism, without a broader look at the power system, who controls that power.

In a sense the West Indies has a legacy of colourism and imperialism, as in India. They left new colonists to run the country, then trained these bureaucrats so really nothing has changed. In that context we shouldn't be attacking each other or worrying whether we can pass for Black or White. That's what I mean about that film, it stops at a purely emotional level of Blacks mating each other.

JG That's why I feel it can be mis-used; a lot of people talk about prejudice and then call it racism thus juxtaposing racism with other types of prejudice.

ME Is there going to be another Film Festival?

PV Funding runs out in March '86!

ME Not long.

JG It really is something that should be set up now and taken on from outside.

PV I think we have created the basis for continuation - the pressure we have put on the British Film Institute to make an ethnic film and television position; there is 'The Metro' a centralised cinema which we have funded, to be based at The Trocadero, Picadilly. We have also recently approved a grant for The Phonix Cinema in Finchley, which is proposing to convert into a community cinema/media resource centre and we would hope Black and Third World films will be shown there. The Ritzy and The Rio have picked up on a lot of the films we have shown. The Asian Film Society operates from Brixton and organise regular screenings.

We have also intervened in the National Film and Television School programme and have had discussions with Sheila Whitaker about developing a programme as part of the NFTS overall programme. There is a season coming up at the NFT on New Indian Cinema, have been asked over to take part in discussions; there are also Cuban and Palestinian film packages planned. I think it is how we have impacted and in a way that will hopefully continue.

ME Yes, having organised something so big outside mainstream cinema - the main organisations are not going to miss out of that cake or they will be badly shown up.

JG That's one thing these programmes have done and they are beginning to respond in a small way.

PV What we need is to create a distribution resource centre.

JG A focal point for Black and Third World Film, where information can flow in and out.

ME Yes because at the moment the Ethnic Arts Sub Committee is anything being developed to create a new focal point.

PV Yes there is a programme being developed and it will be sent to Committee for funding - we have started something in a small way now that can continue to provide information and develop the ideas which have been started.