

FILM POLICY - DISCUSSION PAPER

Background

1 The Independent Black Film makers struggle must be seen in the context of black people's struggle generally for equal aspects of society. Independent black film makers, like other black professionals, have suffered the same racism, prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, an analysis of their situation must be within the context of the specific aspects of the profession - media unions, closed shop agreements, training, professional standards/ethnic traditions plus the institutional, individual and cultural racism of the society.

Any film policy for black independent film makers must take into account political, social and cultural context in which black film makers have been emerging in this country. While all film makers share the problems of finance for their films, black film makers have to face double constraints

2 Unlike Black American film makers who have a long tradition of film making going back to the early 1920's there is no established tradition of black independent film makers in Britain. Here the involvement of black people in films has mainly been confined to television where black people contributed as actors, and more recently as writers and on rare occasions directors. The representation of black people in the media has only become an issue to be debated resulting in the production of papers, articles, check lists etc., on the question of racism and the media.

3 The representation of black people in the media has moved from black objects of racist jokes namely comedy programmes, to where black situation comedies involving a wide variety of black backgrounds have gradually been incorporated into mainstream television drama and documentary programmes. In all this it has been the white producer and the white director who have defined the images that should be portrayed of black people.

4 Images are important as they affect our lives and how we perceive ourselves. In both America and Britain, where the mass media is controlled by white people, the images of black people have been racist. In Britain, the projections of Black people have been limited to the racist stereotypes portrayed in programmes such as 'Love Thy Neighbour'; 'Till Death Us Do Apart'; 'It Aint Half Hot Mum'; 'Empire Road'; 'Walcott'. Added to this will be found the imported Hollywood images of black Americans as mummies, bucks, macho 'dudes', drug pushers, racketeers, coons and menials who have shuffled and danced their way across the screens. These images have helped to define white societies' assessments of black people, while seriously hindering their development of a sense of pride and historical understanding of themselves.

5 The need to present more balanced, relevant and ultimately more positive images of black and 3rd world life on the screen is readily apparent to even the casual movie goer and T.V. viewers. In America, Black Independent Film makers have attempted to challenge these stereotype images, albeit in a small way, by making films on shoe-string budgets. The importance of their work is that it establishes an Afro-American aesthetic which is a new and important contribution to film culture. By working outside the mainstream established commercial industry the independent black producers have maintained control necessary to create works that develop images, explore subjects and speak to issues that offer alternatives to commercial formula presentations. They are creating and establishing authentic images of Black American experience and the films attempt to go beyond the stereotypes presented by Hollywood and the like.

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6 As a counter voice black independents have produced a rich diversity of work in all genres. They present a different America - illustrating black peoples experience of struggle, revolt and emancipation. They are contributing to the demise of the Hollywood creations where blacks could only grin in the cottonfields and as the nannies of white children. Further they help to create authentic images of the black experience, images which black people are able to identify with, draw inspiration from and be proud of their cultural and social heritage. The films attempt to go beyond the stereotypes presented by Hollywood films where black people are nothing more than backdrops. Black film makers are exploring new ways of cinematic language and communication in an attempt to honestly explore their reality and everyday lives of oppressed people. The total struggle in America today is to balance the false conception of white America about Black people that has dominated for so long.

7 Similar struggles are also beginning to take place in Britain with more and more black people wanting to control and direct the images and representation of black people in the media. The struggle is relatively new in Britain as in the words of one black film maker 'we did not come here to make films, we came here to drive their buses'. Historically Black people do not have the image as film makers. However the existing stereotypes of the Indian with the funny accent and the West Indian with the dreadlocks needs to be challenged both from within the media industry and with the establishment of counter images of black people, produced by black people.

8 In Britain today there is a growing number of fully trained black film makers with a variety of skills. What is lacking is the opportunity to use these skills in a positive and creative manner. Channel 4 was seen by many as presenting such an opportunity but, with the exception of one or two, the majority of the black film makers have encountered disappointments. Those black film makers who have been recruited to work on white controlled production companies as researchers, reporters, assistant directors and producers have little or no editorial and financial control over the programmes being made. Experiences such as these are pushing the existing black film makers to move towards the establishment of independent companies. The main desires of existing film makers and those wishing to get into the industry are to make films and have access to film facilities which are controlled and managed by black people.

9 The GLC's role in film needs to be defined and explained with the strategies for race equality. Thus the GLC must not only be involved in creating alternatives but also attacking/dismantling the present structures. The policy, therefore, must have two pronged approach:

- (i) to initiate and develop programmes and schemes to enable existing and aspiring black film makers;
- (ii) to promote access to the mainstream and to encourage changes within the present practices and profession.

The GLC film policy must be such that it will help existing black film makers, enable new ones to emerge and lay the foundation for the development of black film culture. This can be done through the funding of one off productions; establishment of black controlled film and video workshops with training programme and an effective distribution agency.

One-off production and research grants

10 The main concern of black film makers today is that they want to make films. They want to control the camera and not just be its subjects. They want to begin to lay the foundations for a black film culture. They cannot wait for the establishment of workshops be they franchised or not; they do not need the training programmes because they already have the skills. What they do need are resources to research, write and create the kind of films which deal with their experiences as perceived by them and not the anthropological views of white middle class media workers.

11 The Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee have received several proposals from black film makers for grants to research and make films about the black experience both on historical and contemporary issues. These film makers need assistance with one off funding to undertake that vital research, write the shooting script and to shoot the film. Thus if London is to establish a black film culture then these film makers will have to be assisted through grant aid so that they can make these films. For the majority the laying of the foundation through workshops is secondary since the desire to make the film is upper-most in their minds. The GLC, through its Ethnic Arts policies, must therefore, fund film projects which will radically challenge the racist stereotype images of Hollywood and Western Europe.

Workshops

12 The Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee has received a number of applications from groups and organisations applying for small sums of money to buy film and video equipment. In most cases these organisations have not regarded film and video as their central activity. Applications have ranged from capital grants for the purchase of equipment, to a grant for making video of a play, concert or festival. This reflects the desire of black communities to begin documenting the various events taking place in their communities.

13 While such small scale applications deserve support, there is a need to develop a more systematic approach to funding film and video. Such an approach should have the objective of laying the foundation for the emergence and growth of black film culture. One such way of doing this is through the funding of film and video workshops which are controlled and managed by the black communities. Such workshops once established will provide a long lasting base from which training and production can take place. The objective of the committee should be to move toward strategic funding as opposed to funding small items of equipment belonging to individual groups. Workshops are a means of making film and video equipment more accountable to the community and enabling a film culture to emerge from grass roots.

14 There are several reasons why the establishment of black film workshops should be supported with grant aid. These include:

- (a) In order to begin developing a black film culture, black film makers require access to facilities and equipment. Such access to date has been minimal. Of the several film and video workshops to be found in the Greater London Area, very few of them are managed or controlled by black people. Very few employ black people as workers and even fewer have black people represented on their management boards. The establishment of black film workshops will provide the necessary conditions under which black film makers could begin to explore the technical, aesthetic and theatrical problems and issues.
- (b) The technical resources, ie. film equipment etc. unavailable to the black community can be made more accessible through the establishment of film and video resources at local level.
- (c) Access to equipment would facilitate the film making process so desired by many film makers.

15 In evolving policies on funding workshops it should be borne in mind that the nature of workshops have changed and the last two years have seen a steady unionisation of independent film makers into the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians. In 1982 the ACTT developed and adopted an agreement for application within the Independent Sector, the Workshop Declaration (WD). The benefits of the Declaration for the sector and its workers are: Permanent employment; democratic administration; total control of their product; freedom to undertake research; distribution; exhibition and production; unprecedented flexibility in intergrade working; access and network TV. This contrasts starkly with the earlier position of savage underfunding, infrequent single production and a total absence of the continuity which radical film work demands.

16 The ACTT is very keen that the WD should be adopted and that as far as possible all workshops should be franchised. Currently there are four franchised workshop groups in the London Region. (Four Corners, Newsreel, Cinema Action and Front Room Films). A franchised workshop basically means that a group of film makers with a track record (minimum of four) have been able to raise funding to pay themselves a minimum annual wage (at present about £8,000) and are engaged in strictly non-profit distribution activities. The group may apply to the Union for a franchise which will also enable them, with the backing of the Union, to raise production funds from other bodies and sell their production to television channels.

17 The ACTT is concerned to see the establishment of black controlled and managed workshops in the London Region working under the WD. In addition to the advantages outlined above, the ACTT feels this is another way of getting more black people into the Unions.

18 The Workshop Declaration was discussed by black film makers at a recent seminar held in London. During the course of the meeting a consensus on the disadvantages of WD for black film makers emerged. The following were the main disadvantages cited and were also published by the Black Media Workers Association in their newsletter.

Disadvantages

- (a) The Declaration will make certain that anyone who doesn't sign it is very unlikely to get public funds.
- (b) It will limit the number of black workshops which can start, i.e., if there is only a limited fund for workshops all over the country, then there can only be a limited proportion of black workshops within the general pool.
- (c) It confines all black film or video practitioners to the public sector, experimental, non-profit making, non-commercial area.
- (d) Since the ACTT is touting the Workshops as its answer to discrimination and inequality in the industry, it is likely to sidetrack for a very long time any moves to fight discrimination in film and TV.
- (e) It takes blacks out of the mainstream competition.
- (f) The training will fit people to work in the workshop sector, and not for mainstream companies or big commercial features, and there remains the problem, even if people get a workshop card, of turning it into full membership in the union.
- (g) The Declaration also, in fact, is being used to raise more money for white companies on the basis that it will benefit blacks. In fact, the total sum of money available to blacks will be less.

19 The Ethnic Arts Sub Committee has to be selective about funding workshops alone. This is for a number of reasons:-

- (a) limited amount of resources available to the committee;
- (b) sub-committee should not accept the abdication of responsibilities of other funding bodies such as the British Film Institute: Greater London Arts Association: Gulbenkian Foundation Commission For Racial Equality towards funding the establishment of black film and video workshops;
- (c) the greater need of black film makers at present is to have funds to make films now;
- (d) existing workshops should also take on board the question of equality of opportunity and reflect the race dimension in their management and employment structures. Black people must have greater access to existing film and video resources.

Distribution and Exhibition

20 Distribution is the single most important thing in film making. The real task of the film makers only really begins after the film has been completed. Film makers unlike other artists depend to greater extent on audience response. Thus a film for it to have any meaning must be seen by the public. It is the lack of distribution and promotion that have prevented the few black films that have been made in Britain from being seen by a wider audience. The existing major distribution networks and exhibition outlets, both commercial and artistic, are almost exclusively reserved for the work of white film makers. Lack of outlets have also prevented new films from being made by black people. Where black and 3rd world film receive exposure, be it through festivals or seasons, these are restricted by nature and thus seen by limited audiences.

21 The present distribution agencies also are not prepared as yet to take the risk of buying films for which they do not envisage an audience being available. Where they do take the risk and buy the occasional films by black and 3rd world film makers, the films are rarely well promoted.

22 In a country where distribution outlets, promotion and funding for films have almost exclusively been for white film makers, it is important to establish structures which will promote films being made and likely to be made by black and 3rd world film makers. This can only be done through the establishment of an independent distribution agency concerned with the distribution of Black and 3rd world films. The objectives of such a distribution agency should be to make the films available to the widest audience possible and to plough as much resources back to the film makers to enable them to recover the costs of their films and to finance future productions. Such an agency, in order for it to be effective and of benefit to the black communities, must be controlled and managed by the black communities.

Exhibition

23 Films once bought by the distribution agency must be actively promoted so that they can be seen by the widest possible audience. The success of the Britain's first Black Film Festival in 1982 proved that there is an audience, starved of positive and relative images, wanting to see these films. In addition to opening up the television channels and cinema houses, the distribution agency will also need to utilize non traditional venues in the community such as churches, hospitals, prisons, youth clubs, discotheques and community centres for screenings. An active promotion of black and 3rd world films can be done in a number of ways:-

(a) Film Festivals

It is important for the GLC to continue to support the organisation of film festivals such as Third Eye which would provide a platform for the promotion of black and 3rd world films in a festival context. Such exhibitions are vital to the growth of black and 3rd world cinema.

(b) Community Film Programmes

Attempts by community based groups to promote films should be supported and encouraged.

(c) Film Circuit

As part of the Anti-racist activities the Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee should look at the creation of a film circuit in the Greater London Area. The circuit would include films on the theme of Anti Racism and Imperialism and could include schools, universities, youth clubs, churches, community centres, cinemas as the venues.

Training

24 The most frequent arguments used by the mainstream media bodies to justify the under-representation of black people is that either they just do not apply or that they do not have the necessary qualification or the experience. One way of rectifying this imbalance is to simply provide black people with the training opportunities to acquire the necessary experience and qualifications. Channel 4 has responded by setting up familiarisation training courses at the National Film and Television School for ethnic minorities and women. It has also encouraged production companies such as Diverse Production to take on black trainees. The ACTT are presently discussing with Independent Producers Association about a two year training course designed to give "on the job" training with a Union ticket on completion of the course. The scheme is directed at ethnic minorities and women and is still very much in the initial stages of discussion. In addition to these efforts, some workshops also run basic training courses. However, none of the present schemes have any black involvement, management or control. None of these schemes, moreover, are adequate for the training needs of black people.

25 The question is not simply of providing training but what kind of training and for whom. Access to the full range of training opportunities in existence has been denied to black people. There is need to get more black people accepted into Film Institutions such as the National Film and Television School; more black people recruited to work on productions as understudies, and assistants; creation of community based film resources which are controlled and managed by the black communities.

26 There is also the need to set up training which is a specific answer to black training requirements which should be defined, managed and controlled by black people. There has been no opportunities for black people to create training agencies and the GLC should encourage projects which seek to do this. The training schemes should not be an end in themselves but lead to other things such as acquisition of union ticket; opportunity to work on productions; continued access to resources and places in Film Institutes. All training schemes should also have the support and be recognised by ACTT.

27 The Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee should play a very useful role in monitoring the effects of the numerous training schemes already in operation and others still being negotiated. It could do this in a number of ways:-

- (a) The GLC, through the Arts and Recreation Committee, funds a number of workshops some of who have a training programme linked to their productions. The GLC should make it a condition of grant aid that not only should these workshops seek to get black representation onto management bodies and as worker but also run specific training programmes at community level directed at encouraging greater participation of black people.
- (b) If the GLC is to fund the training scheme being negotiated by ACTT and IPA, then the Sub-Committee should have a seat on the negotiating table.
- (c) Make representations to the NFTS with a view to identifying ways of enabling more black people to gain entry into the Film School.

GLC Film Policy Group

28 A film policy group made up of representatives from ACTT; British Film Institute; Independent Film makers Association; GLAA, Community Arts Policy Advisor and the Ethnic Arts Adviser has been meeting to discuss the GLC film policy and the future. The group is concerned with evolving an overall film policy for the GLC and has addressed itself to the following specific issues: Community Cinema, workshops, training and the establishment of a Film Trust.

It is imperative that the Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee has representation on this working group to ensure that its policy initiatives are taken on board and interegated.

Women's Considerations

29 Any film policy should take account of the position of women in the film industry, both as professionals and in terms of the negative images of women predominantly in films.

30 Summary of Policy Statements

- (a) to fund "one off" the productions as a high priority;
- (b) to fund workshops;
- (c) establish distribution agency for black and 3rd world films which is controlled and managed by black people;
- (d) to fund exhibition of films;
- (e) to fund training schemes created, managed and controlled by black people.

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