Listening Back to the Archives

When walking along the aisles of an archive, aspects of the past present themselves. Contrary to the experience of reading history through a textbook, archives and collections forge a material embodiment of the past through objects, items and artefacts. Safely housed, they grant the space for writers, curators and researchers to reintroduce and frame cultural material – or perhaps even further overlook historical documents – where it is inscribed with today's values and interests. An enquiry into which histories remain absent or suppressed or unrecognised is vitally needed. Indeed, the question remains how the archival apparatus produces these oversights. Furthermore, which voids persist in cultural representation, under what circumstances, and how might we reimagine the nature of collective recollection?

As part of a one-year fellowship spanning 2020 to 2021 at the Decolonising Arts Institute at University of the Arts London, I have explored the interwoven correlations between 'cultural memory' and coloniality. Being British-Iranian, I approach these subjects from a dual ethnocultural lived experience, analysing the archive and its hospitality towards the embodiment of a collective cultural representation, broadly attempting to uncover and map networks of ethnic-minority cultural practitioners.

The British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at Central Saint Martins, brought together by Malcolm Le Grice (Interview AM401) and David Curtis in 2000, comprises significant examples of experimental moving- image and related publications in the UK from the mid 1960s to the late 1990s. Spending months viewing this collection reveals, perhaps unsurprisingly, a lack of diversity, with minimal representation of black and Asian practitioners. Nevertheless, examples such as Death Valley Days, 1984, by Gorilla Tapes, Handsworth Songs, 1986, by Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), and I'm British But…, 1989, by Gurinder Chadha establish rich counterpoints. These videos facilitate a revisiting of 1980s social and political unrest, providing analysis for the early cultural integration of black and Asian communities in the UK. Additionally, these examples provide a framework for re-examining sociopolitical discriminations and prejudices of the recent past against antagonisms witnessed today, such as those of the Windrush generation.

This is seen in the much-discussed but poignant work Handsworth Songs, which uncovers stories and images of the Handsworth riot in Birmingham 9–11 September 1985 following the killings of the two brothers Kassamali Moledina, 38, and Amirali, 44, in their shop. The film also depicts images of the Broadwater Farm riot in London. This social unrest occurred a month after the Handsworth riot and was triggered by the death of black woman Cynthia Jarrett on 5 October. It culminated in the death of the white policeman Keith Blakelock the following day. The film-essay frames the discontent of the Handsworth community, incorporating interviews with members of the community, snapshots of newspaper headlines and re-filmed archival footage.

The sonic and visual crystallisations of the story by John Akomfrah, a member of BAFC, sharply represent the frustration of the Handsworth community and also the oppression

felt by generations of ethnic minorities. Indeed, the evident disconnection from mainstream politics of those in Handsworth Songs will be depressingly familiar to anyone who has heard witnesses describe the US police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests that spread around the globe.

Under the Covid-19 pandemic protocols, a screening and online discussion of Handsworth Songs was organised this summer by Lisson Gallery. Attempting to review the relevance of the film against today's social unrest, the writer and curator Ekow Eshun raised a question about the footage of statues in the opening scenes of the film, and the emotional and affective power they deliver. In response, Akomfrah described statues as the political falsification of chiefly conservative values, rather than something closer to that of historical representation: 'There are certain commemorative values ... which are not merely to do with the historical, mythic or symbolic ... It is precisely to do with this business of figuring out a way in which the statue becomes a falsification – a defining semiotic language for describing the best of us, or what we are brilliant at.'

This falsification of cultural values that Akomfrah outlines, embodied in many public statues, was evidently manifested in Bristol, where the public's demand for a slave-owner statue to be toppled carried with it a global demand for racial liberation (Artnotes AM438). The doubling effect of this engagement, from the archival past to the present, reinforces the semiotic oppression encoded in such and in the stratifications of western colonial power.

Mainstream broadcast media, which is actively complicit in this process, came under the scrutiny of Gorilla Tapes, a Scratch-video artist collective whose work was intended to raise awareness of the prejudicial and partisan interests that govern broadcast news. Consisting of Jon Dovey, Gavin Hodge, Jean McClements and Tim Morrison, the group became influential through their ironic, inexpensive political tapes, which were mainly made by montaging old movie footage and combining it with TV news content. Included in David Curtis's 2007 book A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain, the collective described their strategy as being to 'reveal the true message behind the manufactured mediation of news and politics'. The group's Death Valley Days was a satire composed to criticise the 1980s policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and their so-called 'special relationship'. The work revealed the colonial imperialist manifestos that lay behind liberal appearances and superficial slogans by juxtaposing images of military equipment and personnel with the two politicians giving speeches about peace.

As much as Handsworth Songs highlights the sociopolitical concerns rooted in colonial legacies as revealed by a pivotal event in UK history, Chadra's documentary I'm British But... presents other sociocultural aspects of black and Asian life in the UK, and the manifestation of cultural diversity as understood in the 1980s. The film utilises recordings from interviews and documentation of quotidian events to reflect the social dynamics of the late 1980s in Southall – a west London suburb – and represent the gradual cultural exchanges between Asian and British communities in the area. Hinting at some positive aspects, Chadra engages viewers with a narrative that introduces a successful process of intercultural exchanges and progressive social integrations – a

notion defined by Homi K Bhabha as cultural diversity. Bhabha analysed this process in his 2006 essay 'Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences' and described it as 'an epistemological object – culture as an object of empirical knowledge'. One particular section of Chadra's documentary gives voice to the then young British-Asian musician Haroon Shamsher, who describes the inspirations, origins and the rationale of composing Bangla music – a fusion between Punjabi folk and western pop – as a youth movement initiated in London's East End. 'I see music as being a good mainstream way to put your feelings across, and this is how I do it,' Shamsher explains. 'I'm mixing together Bengali music, folk music, and western music, and making people appreciate and actually forcing them to dance to our music.'

Shamsher's strategy in his music practice is to reconcile audiences from different cultural backgrounds, an act which, in Jacques Derrida's terms, is as an attempt to earn the rights of hospitality in a dominant culture – a condition which can only transpire when the 'question of hospitality is articulated with the question of being'. His methods of mixing Bengali music themes and tempos with pop, hip hop and dance music enacts an intercultural exchange through sonic interventions. While this is a strength in Shamsher's work, there is a risk, as stated by Bhabha, that cultural diversity 'gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity'.

When I discussed similar social and political themes with Mitra Tabrizian, a British-Iranian artist and filmmaker living in the UK, she indicated that the positive influence she gained from the process of immigration came from 'observing both (British and Iranian) cultures from an outsider's point of view'. Tabrizian's notion of strangeness is visible in her photographic series 'Borders', which portrays Iranian immigrants in states of prolonged waiting. After interviewing volunteers for their participation in this series, it appeared to her that they all feel as if they are waiting, that they have 'unfinished business'. The fraught subject of 'home' is captured by Tabrizian; her subjects are all strangers to the dominant society. In my exchanges with Tabrizian, she described this condition as being similar to the endless sense of unease felt by the characters in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot.

This space of undefined presence – a feeling of in-between and waiting – originates from an unfulfilled sense of belonging or recognition. Nevertheless, it does not remain at an individual level; it expands and applies to the formation of cultural values and the recognition of what is considered as value and knowledge. It is this line of inquiry which establishes the central role of archives and collections – including the work of educational institutions – to provide the means of public consciousness for cultural recognition and awareness.

Exploring these contexts with June Givanni, a UK-based Guyanese-born curator of pan-African and diasporic black cinema, the curator expressed the difficulties she encountered during the 1980s and 1990s when she began to introduce black cinema to cultural scenes and institutional collections in the UK. From her early curatorial work for the Third Eye film festival in London in 1983 and over her 40-year career, Givanni has contributed to many local and international projects, including seminars, conferences,

publications and exhibitions. In particular, Givanni collated the very first edition of the Black and Asian Film & Video List in 1988, which was realised as part of a commission for BFI. Asking about her long curatorial practice and her experiences, Givanni remarked: 'Cinema, whether its festivals, genres, whatever, you are always on the outside and being compared to what are regarded as the central tenets [of an institution] … very often you are challenging some of those central tenets.'

Givanni's points loop us back to the notion of strangeness. Challenging the central principles of dominant cultural values is part of the enduring process of decolonisation. In any non-inclusive system (including its archives), this process is hidden in the restless and continuing hopeful search to attain the rights of hospitality, which would enable the dissemination and distribution of alternative cultural values. This is precisely reflected, perceived, and identified in Givanni's work – an exercise to familiarise alternative cultural values to break through the semiotic oppression operating in institutional hierarchies.

The process of educational and cultural liberation is clearly perceptible in Givanni's collection, a section from which is currently on show at London's MayDay Rooms. The June Givanni Pan African Film Archive collection consists of films, posters, publications, audio and other film-related materials, and provides a significant source of information and educational repository for diasporic pan-African cinema. Currently in search for an organisation to host the collection permanently and, equally importantly, to preserve the anti-colonial ethos of the collection for the generations to come, Givanni explains the intention behind working with this medium: 'cinema was important to me, because it was a way of coming to a medium and bringing aesthetics, bringing a history, bringing culture, bringing experiences, that add to the very nature of what cinema is … [and] cultures that are not often valued …'

Givanni's project demonstrates the importance of working towards creating discursive collections in archives, and their role in pedagogical praxis, with the capacity of portraying contributors collectively. The process of decolonisation can only be effective through a direct dialogical interaction with those excluded from society; it has to be materialised through their values, their ethos and collective knowledge. The process must give space for alternative voices in an attempt to potentially redirect the process of colonisation into one of liberation. The educational theorist and anticolonialist thinker Paulo Freire argued that this framework of dialogical interactions was critical for the process of decolonisation. In his 1970 book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he emphasised that the dialogues between the 'oppressor and the oppressed' must entail 'action', and that the content of these exchanges 'can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality'.

Although the recent drives for decolonisation in many UK institutions – mainly as a response to growing criticism from those directly affected – has seen an engagement with so-called minority groups, there is the possibility that problems can potentially be disguised under new languages of coloniality. This occurs through the false impression that the process of decolonisation can be achieved by entry alone. This will indeed help to tick the racial diversity boxes when the annual forms are due; it will not, however,

enable real infrastructural change. In other words, if the dialogical process of engaging with any minority does not entail ‘common reflection’ and ‘action’, as Freire describes, it will only result in ‘pseudo-participation, [and not] committed involvement’.

To avoid this fissure, it is vital to embody reflection and action in the process of dialogue. It is only through this channel that we can succeed in retracting colonial stratifications, not only in the archives, but also in the wider sociopolitical dimensions of collective living. Only through this pathway can we critically unveil the reality of suppression and then be able to challenge it.

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