



The Black Audio Film Collective's slick work chronicled and cross-examined Britain's new multicultural reality. **Adrian Searle** tracks them from 80s students to multimedia experts

Voices of the rising tide

The voice comes from another world, another age. "They don't know who they are or what they are," says the voice, sounding as if it wears a wing collar and is always red in the face. "And really, what you are asking me is how the hell one gives them a sense of belonging..." This fragment from the ether, sampled from the BBC Panorama programme, belongs to the late Sir Ronald Bell QC, Conservative MP and senior member of the rightwing Monday Club. Bell, who died in 1982, wanted the race relations act repealed, immigration halted, the tide stemmed. His patrician tones are a mantra, weaving among other voices, echoed beats of dub reggae and samples of *musique concrète*.

Signs of Empire is the earliest work in The Ghosts of Songs, a retrospective exhibition of the Black Audio Film Collective at Fact, in Liverpool, which will move to London and Bristol. On the screen, the dying and the dead fade in and out: here is a white woman smiling among the savages; there, a pile of bodies. The images keep slipping away. The voice always returns.

Signs of Empire is a movie by other means, a "narrative with stills", a tape/slide presentation using archival images and sound. There are optimistic invocations of a multiracial Commonwealth, family-album photos of colonial life, forbidden shots, collisions, burning buildings. Half an hour long, Signs of Empire (the title a neat twist on Roland Barthes' Empire of Signs) remains disturbing, almost a quarter of a century after it was made. There is something lulling and hypnotic in the rhythmic procession of images, while the soundtrack is a countersurge of accumulating dread.

Almost everything the Black Audio Film Collective was to achieve in the 1980s and 90s was already there in this early work, however basic the technology. The collective – John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Trevor Mathison, Edward George and Claire Johnson (replaced by David Lawson in 1985) – officially formed in 1983, but began working together as a loose group of friends and fellow students at Portsmouth polytechnic two years earlier. Many of the collective's later works were com-



'Seductive stylishness'... (above) **The Last Angel of History (1995)**; (right) **Who Needs a Heart (1991)**

missioned by Channel 4, and one might ask what they are doing in a gallery. Are these documentaries, film essays, art or the movies? Where do they belong?

Their best-known work, Handsworth Songs (1986), is now regarded as emblematic of a turn towards the archival and towards documentary in recent art. It is also concerned with memory – the way memory is always a matter of fragments rather than com-

pleteness, and is always a construction of the imagination. Made in the wake of the 1985 riots in Birmingham and London, Handsworth Songs broods, lingers, is generous, subjective and so much more intelligent than most documentaries now. This is largely because it refuses to sit neatly within a rigid television genre. It acknowledges its own subjectivity, and rides on passion and anger, subtlety and wit. It's all in the cutting, the rhythm and the drive. We see West Indian immigrants arriving on the Windrush in their best clothes, dignified and optimistic, into smoggy, dirty, austere England. We watch National Front leader John Tyndall arriving at a meeting in the West Midlands, guarded by riot police. The camera tracks burned-out buildings. We overhear a lighting engineer and a TV director asking why the footage they are shooting in a public meeting looks so dark: it's because the faces in the audience are almost all black. The camera, it seems, doesn't like them.

The voices of different communities caught in the crossfire – Muslims, Sikhs, West Indians – are angry, but



somehow more hopeful than they might be today. Watching Handsworth Songs now, from the other side of 9/11, it is as though we were a world away.

The same is true of Twilight City, a 1989 film about London, in which archive footage (Nehru visiting the site of a monument to Gandhi, the destruction of London's Chinatown in Limehouse during the blitz) is mixed with a discussion of the plight of London's Somali community, the architectural blight of the Shell Centre on the South Bank, the effects of Section 28 and much more besides. Even Hogarth is in there, and, oddly, it all hangs together in that baggy, sprawling way that the city does.

These are more than quaint period pieces. Watching Handsworth Songs now (or Isaac Julien's 1984 film, Territories), one sees not just the articulation of a political position, or an emotion, but the emergence of an aesthetic that seemed to have arrived almost fully formed from the start, in several places and in different media, whose pleasures were matched only by their complexity and refusal of easy categorisation. The formal sophistication and ambition of these works are not to be underestimated.

That said, one of the low points of this exhibition is an "installation" in which the founding members of the collective have each contributed 12 books and 12 pieces of music, with the book jackets and album covers presented behind glass in two hexagonal chambers. It is hard to see what these add. The vitrines of ephemera and memorabilia – scripts, group photographs, publicity material – are similarly unhelpful and uninvitingly presented in gloomy corners.

The best of the BAFC remains the film and video work itself. Another achievement was the way they worked

collectively, not seeing themselves as belonging to either the television world or the art world, and imagining the possibility that such distinctions could be redundant: choosing not to make a choice.

The works the BAFC made during the 80s and early 1990s are almost shocking in their range. Seven Songs for Malcolm X, made in 1993, mixes interviews with fiction, footage of the real Malcolm X, his friends, associates and family (and Spike Lee, already embarked on his own biopic of the civil rights leader), with a series of *tableaux vivants* that bring to mind the films of Derek Jarman. Seven Songs is filled with an atmosphere of unease, threat, anxiety and premonition. Malcolm X is said to have practised telepathy in prison. He appears haunted, pursued by phantoms. The ability to invoke atmosphere or a psychological state is not to be underestimated here: it is a driving force in all the BAFC's work.

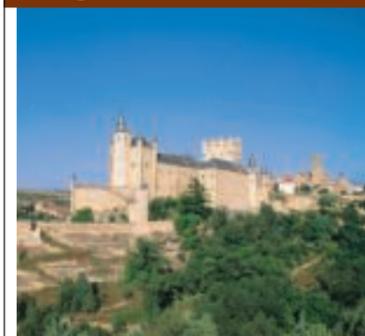
The collective was heavily informed by film and psychoanalytic theory, by political discussion and debate. It is salutary to note how unfashionable these are, however much intense theorising there is in the exhibition catalogue. Sadly, much of it is likely to remain unread. Perhaps the most significant achievement of the group was the formulation of a poetic, a tone of voice, a particular kind of filmic space that resisted categorisation.

Kodwo Eshun, the group's most compelling commentator, writes that they "projected a stance of high seriousness with seductive stylishness". Stylishness could be serious too, and they always carried their seriousness with something much more than style ●

The Ghosts of Songs is showing at Fact, Liverpool (0151-707 4444/www.fact.co.uk), until April 1.

We hear a TV director asking why the footage of a public meeting is so dark. It's because the faces in the audience are all black

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