

# 'Film & Video Workshops' — Production and Images

by Karen Alexander

There has been a lot of talk about how badly black people are portrayed in the media, and how our voice is not heard. Some of our protests have been answered with a few more black faces appearing on television, and a few more black programmes in the television schedules. Although these moves are a step in the right direction, they are not getting to grips with the real problem of black representations as they exist in society as a whole. Until this type of work is developed we are not going to get any nearer to understanding how and why these representations exist, and how we might set about changing them.

What has to be remembered about all visual representations is that they are social constructions, and that what they articulate is a result of human choice, cultural decisions and social pressures. What is presented to us, the audience, is a constructed view of reality. Needless to add, most of the films and television produced in this country are by white middle-class males. It is their ideology which is pushed out to us, day in and day out. It is their view of the world — and our position in it — that expresses itself through a seemingly 'natural' series of representations, which are constantly being reinforced by the media.

In recent years there has been a conscious effort to recruit more black people into the media. But despite this, there has been little or no effort to recruit blacks into the technical side of production. This situation will change in time, with pressure. But it has to be recognised that because of the way in which the media are organised, black media workers' influence on how black people are represented may continue to be marginal — because their work will be fed into a whole series of mainstream-oriented representations, which are constantly revising social relations and how we perceive them.

## Oppositional work

Alongside the mainstream media output there has always been a 'space' for oppositional forms of film and, more recently, of video production. This oppositional work has usually been produced by groups who try and question the legitimacy and authority of the ruling class and their dominant ideas. This

questioning has tended to be on two fronts, which sometimes merge into one: content (subject matter) and form (how the subject matter is conveyed).

Black people's involvement in this oppositional media has usually been at the level of content — i.e. using independent film and video facilities for documenting events or producing campaign films or tapes with clear agit-prop intentions, for specific political struggles. For those working in this area, alternative media workshops offer a space where skills can be learned, and where exploration and experimentation in image construction can be carried out. This independent oppositional sector is a valuable area for black people interested in the media to involve themselves in. It offers a chance of producing work which does not have to go through the diluting

and filtering process which large-scale media production tends to bring.

## Dealing with images

There have been recent moves to set up film and video workshops along the same lines as the existing community-based groups, to serve the black community. The aim is to enable more black people to start producing films and videotapes primarily for their own consumption, although some of what is produced could be for a wider audience.

In these workshops, if they come about, the type of work which has to be taken up (alongside pure production) is the exploration and study of black images, how images of black people are constructed in the media and how they create meanings. This work could be tackled in a



(Photo: Isaac Julien)

number of ways and what follows is an outline of work I have carried out, or would carry out, with groups wanting to know about video production.

1. After a few practical sessions, groups usually get the hang of how the equipment operates and they are able to shoot things. When viewing what has been shot, it is useful to start questioning why certain shots were used and what was the intended 'message'. The group might then look at a whole range of images and representations which depict black people taken from various media such as books, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, clips from films and extracts from television programmes.

The points I would want to bring out in discussion would revolve around how participants, both individually and as a group, reacted to the representations and question where their 'knowledge' came from. Some images are anchored by captions or by a voice-over soundtrack: here, the pertinent question would be 'why is this practice necessary and why are certain words chosen and not others?'

2. In practical workshops the construction of shots can be looked at. The way something is shot indicates what our attitude is to the subject. The images we see on television are only a fraction of the possible images which exist. Thus, are there ways of filming or video recording black people which result in positive images of black people? How are positive and negative 'readings' constructed? An exercise which helps people to understand some of the ways in which this is done is to divide the group into two and, giving video equipment to both, have each shoot exactly the same subject (it may be a block of flats or a churchyard) — one group is asked to show the 'positive' and the other the 'negative' aspects. This exercise gets across the point about the choices which go on all the time in the media very well.

3. Some of the work of a black film and video workshop should centre around how we react to images of ourselves. For example, how do we react to images of Caribbean, African and Asian people? Where do we get our information about each other from? Why are we faced with the ironic situation in which black people put each other down because of real or imagined 'racial' attributes or differences in pigmentation? Where does this negative 'knowledge' come from?

Finally, as always there are more questions than answers; but hopefully some of the answers can be worked towards, by black people increasingly involving themselves in the type of investigations I have briefly outlined here.

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# The Great Babylonian Broadcasting Conspiracy

by Gus Guillen

If a radio professional told you s/he intended to make a radio programme about 'Oxford' and that the method employed was to pick, more or less randomly, a group of three to eight 'Oxfordians', give them a pep talk, a cassette and tell them to get on with it how would you rate its chances of success?

Possessed of the layman's naive faith in mediaspeak you might decide to chew the problem around a bit, having been told that you have been especially picked out for the task.

By what tortuous path of (un)reasoning, you might wonder, was such a vague and generalised category of 'Oxford' arrived at? Hasn't the programme got any more specific aims or goals? No time to waste on idle discussion the media person answers, must get on with the job, chin up, pull together as a team, play cricket... and then presents you with a ready-made magazine format.

Brushing aside that paranormal agenda which leaves you with a queasy feeling, you think well, why should a layman get uppity about things he's got no real grasp of. Daddy media knows best after all.

Another doubt assails you: but how can we turn around and suddenly produce a slick, marketable, professional product when we haven't had very much (none in some cases) media experience? These things don't arise, is the answer, for we are engaged in *community radio*. And besides, it just so turns out you're all skilled, intelligent and either totally or partially unemployed.

Leaving that point aside for the moment what expertise, what resources is the radio station putting into this? A couple of hours a week, twenty quid and... me, is the answer.

Utopianism, altruism and masochism aside (the torrent of your questioning becoming ever more frantic before the Kafkaesque denouement...) given that we are all skilled, intelligent and in search of gainful employment what's in it for us? Well, the heady uplift of knowing there's a job well done and but the vaguest possibility that management will approve of the programme this time... (oh there have been other attempts? Yes, one might say that...). Of course, there's no guarantee the programme will ever even get off the air... or on it for that matter.

Well, you say, a little shamefacedly, I was thinking of baser things like, and I know 'Oxfordians' aren't really meant to have these materialistic feelings but... things like pay, promotion, prestige, work?

Oh, I get those, says the person.

Travelling expenses? A free meal ticket perhaps?

Nope, we can't stretch our resources too much now, can we? You must understand, we're in a precarious position. If we ask for too much they might scrap the whole project, these are hard times, the cuts, inflation, the recession... How about a cup of tea.

At this point you may be forgiven for thinking that you are being candidly filmed for 'Game for a Laugh', out to test the limits of human credulity and your exploitability for hair brained schemes. Or perhaps in a moment of demented paranoia you might wonder if there is a conspiracy to wreck any chances of success for the 'Oxfordians'. A Great Broadcasting Conspiracy?

If we change the word 'Oxford' for 'Black' what you have just read is a not overparodied account of Radio Oxford's attempts to create a 'black spot' on their whiter than white media horizon. Change the word 'Oxford' to 'Black' and media pundits and professionals find some strange logic in it, some innovative and iconoclastic method of making radio.

And I, as one of the more or less randomly picked black people who participated in yet another 'unsuccessful' attempt to start a black programme in Radio Oxford might be forgiven for asking, whatever will the Babylonian Broadcasting Conspiracy (or BBC, as it's colloquially known) come up with next?

I suppose I'd better spell it out. I'm not talking about 'positive discrimination' or 'civil rights' or even a special media favour. I'm talking about the black community trying to claw back some of its hard earned rates from a system of cultural distribution and production that excludes black culture.

I'm talking about access and representation (we naively called the programme 'One Voice'). Two weeks ago I was interviewing a black community worker on multiracial welfare work and organisation within the black community and it's funny how the same theme crops up. He was explaining to me how difficult he found it to put across to white people in the labour movement the disaffiliation of the black community from the political structure. Put plainly, he said, what's the point of popping something in the ballot box if you never get anything out of it?

Yet when you are black you are meant to operate only from the three cardinal 'isms': utopianism, altruism, masochism.

You know, Mad Nick can get a free cup of tea from the Church Army or the Night Shelter any day without having to turn out a radio programme for it.