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History, landscape, nation: British independent film and video in the 1970s and 1980s

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ABSTRACT

This article examines uses of history in British independent film and video in the 1970s and 1980s, looking at ways in which radical pasts were called on to foster struggle in the present. In tracing the specific influence of New Left cultural historians on independent film and video, as well as television, during these two decades, this paper also suggests ways in which the nation is figured, contested and re-drawn in specific works by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, Phil Mulloy and Black Audio Film Collective. A rich and diverse framework of Left historical discourse is outlined, suggesting that the exploration of a socialised landscape (the city as well as the country) played on and renegotiated existing myths and tropes of Britishness, identity and belonging. This article also fills a gap in existing accounts of radical film's uses of history, going beyond valedictory accounts of modernist historiography to assert the vitality of a complex counterpublic discourse. It concludes with a reflection on problems in the depiction and imagination of the past today.

KEY WORDS

British independent film

counter-cinema

New Left

history

nationalism

landscape

counter-pastoral

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of radical film and video makers in Britain turned to the nation's past for insights into pressing ideological struggles of the present. In doing so, they contested lingering assumptions about British sociopolitical life (related to issues of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity) that dominated large swathes of media representation on television, radio and newspapers.¹ Through my discussion of several independent productions including *Winstanley* (1975, Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo), and *In the Forest* (1978, Phil Mulloy) and *Handsworth Songs* (1986, Black Audio Film Collective), I will highlight ways in which independent film and video, as well as radical programming on television, was informed by, or engaged in a critique of, the influential work of historians of the New Left, such as E. P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, Sheila Rowbotham and Raphael Samuel.

My focus here is mainly on the work of film-makers associated with the counter-cinema and the independent film and video sector of the period, rather than with the artisanal hub of the London Filmmakers' Co-op.² The films discussed are part of an avant-garde that owes its lineage to Godard and Straub-Huillet, and whose intellectual roots are usually related to Lacanian and Althusserian film discourses as played out in

the journals *Cahier du cinéma* and *Screen*. However, as I shall make clear, any account of the ways in which these films approach issues of history and the past must be understood within wider media ecologies. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s, diverse film-makers, including Ken Loach, Alan Clarke, Peter Watkins, Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman, explored imagined national pasts as sites of cultural resistance. Oppositional historical discourse was rooted in diverse aspects of the fragmented Left, ranging from Jarman's complex relation to queerness and nationalism (Ellis 2009), to Loach's investment in Trotskyist politics, as well as influences including new feminist historical writing by figures such as Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor.

These currents must be understood in contrast to right-wing media presentations of history in both cinema and television. During the 1970s and 1980s, the BBC continued to convey an idealised vision of the nation united in deference to the ruling classes, with the 'presentation of state pageants as national, family events, in which everyone could take part' (Cannadine 2012: 142). Then (as now), costume dramas offered a steady stream of depictions centred on specific periods of imagined national unity and strength, such as the English Renaissance, the late Victorian era and the two World Wars.³ In the 1980s, the British film industry experienced its own 'renaissance', with films by Merchant-Ivory and others glorifying the exploits of the English upper classes tailored to both domestic and export markets.⁴ Films and television series such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981, Granada TV, dir. Julian Jarrold), turn 'their backs on the industrialised, chaotic present' and 'nostalgically re-construct an imperialist and upper-class Britain' (Higson 2006, 93). In such films, harmonious class relations and the empire were valorised at the very moment that Thatcher was

urging the nation to return to 'Victorian values' of family life and private entrepreneurship.⁵ This, of course, is not to claim that television was monolithically right-wing; as I shall assert here, it also had significant dissident currents.

It could be argued that the widespread cultural influence of a range of British New Left historians on the one hand, and on the other hand, the film discourse of Althusserian and modernist critiques of historiographical practice, were both to have a significant impact on independent British film of the 1970s. Yet, as I shall also examine, the influence of New Left historical writing in the 1980s was countered by critic-theorists such as Paul Gilroy, Coco Fusco and Stuart Hall. Such writers forcefully argued that the emphasis on oppositional struggles within the nation elided transnational identities and ethnicities. Before examining these later reactions, however, it is important to understand the richness of Left historical discourse in the early 1970s. New Left cultural historians including Thompson, Hill, Rowbotham and Samuel, published numerous books during the 1960s and 1970s foregrounding strands of radical struggle in English and British history. Thompson's and Hill's work took seriously the written records of working class activists and revolutionaries in letters, testimonies and protest songs in order to construct lineages of radical dissent and literacy among the urban and rural poor. Samuel was a major figure in the development of 'history workshop' sessions, in which ordinary people were invited to explore and record their memories; while Rowbotham combined feminist activism and historical research in her books and articles for the alternative press.⁶

The historical discourse generated by the New Left was to have a significant cultural impact. Politically Left historical work in film and television was produced, received

and circulated at this time among a relatively wide public. Samuel observed a popular interest in the writing of socialist historians such as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson and Sheila Rowbotham (Samuel 1981: xi), which were developed through theatre groups such as Red Ladder, and television workers and film-makers such as Ken Loach and Andrew Mollo.⁷ For example, Loach's dramatised television series *Days of Hope* (BBC 1, 1975) on the lives of a family from the First World War to the General Strike (1916–1926) was widely seen and discussed. At the same time, practices of oral history or 'people's histories' were prevalent, with numerous local groups recording and writing their own histories. While the emphasis of oral history was on local experience, the specific struggles related to wider issues of social welfare (such as rights for women, workers, and others), and helped to generate a widespread socialist discourse on the state of the nation within a socialist framework. This widespread debate was to play out in the development of both protest and cultural production: for example Rowbotham and Alexander worked in support of striking women cleaners in London, and both appear in the Berwick Street Film Collective's film of the struggle, *Nightcleaners* (1975).

On the other hand, as mentioned above, film discourse was also influenced by the politically radical theories of international figures such as Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to Louis Althusser. While their discourses were diverse, they chimed with the contemporary need to challenge and rethink forms of historical narration and methodology. The significance of these discourses in the radical culture of the 1970s exemplifies what D.N. Rodowick calls the 'discourses of political modernism', where *'the possibility of a radical, political text is conditioned by the necessity of an avant-garde representational strategy'* (Rodowick 1994: 12. Italics in original). The

strategy to which Rodowick refers included an array of techniques, such as Bertolt Brecht's and Viktor Schklovsky's related notions of distanciation or estrangement, particularly through the use of stilted acting, anachronistic costume or setting, and elliptical or episodic narrative structure. The intention of such techniques was to activate the viewer who was, it was argued, rendered passive by the smooth flow of the realist film text and the cinematic apparatus. While these arguments are no longer seen as tenable within moving image discourse,⁸ they were nevertheless fundamental to the aesthetics of counter-cinema productions in the 1970s and 1980s.

In their engagement with Brecht, Benjamin and Althusser, independent film and video discourse in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s asked difficult questions about issues of historical representation that had gone unaddressed by most British New Left historians. One important current here was the translation, publishing and circulation of texts from French and German critical theory. In particular, Benjamin's 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' (1940) draws on Brecht to argue against a smoothly narrated 'historicism' in favour of a technique that harnesses the past's fragments as a sort of montage, 'as it flashes up at a moment of danger' in order to imagine a new future (Benjamin 2007: 255). In the 1970s, Benjamin's arguments were revitalised and altered from an Althusserian perspective, first in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* and subsequently in *Screen*, as well as at the Edinburgh Film Festival's Brecht event in 1975, and the EFF's 'History/Production/Memory' event in 1977, which resulted in a magazine-like publication edited by the film theorist and activist Claire Johnston (Johnston 1977). The publication reveals the demands put on film-makers by theorists, to produce works that would use modernist techniques of fragmentation and

estrangement, which (the publication argued) would promote an active reading of the film text.

In her introduction to the publication, Johnston draws on Althusser's writing to directly attack assumptions made by many historians (including those of the New Left) that history was a terrain of testimony, fact, and experience, traceable through close study of letters, songs and oral records. By contrast, Johnston calls for a 'non-empiricist Marxist theory of history' (Johnston 1977: 6) – that is, an account of history based on Althusser's demands for a 'scientific' reformulation of Marx.⁹

Related arguments are made in the same publication by Colin MacCabe, who argues against realist depictions of history in Tony Garnett and Ken Loach's television series *Days of Hope* – a honeyed vision of class militancy and solidarity, touching on issues of English imperialism in Ireland and union betrayals during the General Strike (MacCabe, 1977).¹⁰

Certainly, a deep philosophical divide separates the 'science' of Althusser and the humanism of the cultural historians such as E.P. Thompson¹¹. However, in retrospect, we can see that both Althusserian critics and New Left historians held certain ideals in common: primarily, they shared a utopian desire to release the past's potential in the present. Not only was this one of the key assertions of Brecht,¹² but E.P. Thompson believed that history could help trace 'dormant seeds of political Radicalism', which were important because, he argued, in 'some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure' (Thompson 1980: 10). His view was shared by Hill, 'History has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change the present does' (Hill

1991: 15-16), whilst Rowbotham's introduction to her 1972 *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, argued that '[this will] be a useful book only if it is repeatedly dismantled and reconstructed as part of a continuing effort to connect feminism to socialist revolution' (Rowbotham 2014: 7). Such comments do not suggest the closed, teleological view of history critiqued by Benjamin in his 'Thesis', and by Althusser and the writers of *Cahiers* and *Screen*, but rather an awareness of the openness and mutability of the past as a public discourse. Far from being polar opposites, independent film and video in Britain often stitched together these two approaches – the humanist New Left and political modernism – creating in their films a hybrid fusion of oppositional national history with a critical approach to film form, by rendering narratives from these histories through the formal requirements of political modernist film discourse.

Figures in the landscape: Diggers, Levellers and the English revolution

From the early 1970s onwards there is therefore detectable a circulation of reference points, an echoing of influences, and a repetition of historical examples between historians, film-makers, theatre directors, journalists and novelists, amongst others. Often these ideas first emerged within the work of social historians, before appearing in literature, film, theatre or television.¹³ By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a wide range of British independent films would fuse these discourses with Althusserian and neo-Brechtian film discourse. For example, a reflection on the historical role of the welfare state and the oppression of women was a question within feminist historiographical research that was picked up and developed in *Song of the Shirt* (McIntosh 2006), which also used widespread 'Brechtian' motifs of anachronistic

location shots and costumes in its account of the working conditions of seventeenth-century seamstresses.

A key influence on the depiction of a radical English past within independent film is the work of the historian Christopher Hill. Hill is the principal figure who helped popularise debates on the seventeenth-century English Revolution (a term he used instead of ‘English Civil War’ to emphasise its parallels with subsequent class struggles), starting with his *The English Revolution, 1640* (1940), and culminating in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). For Hill, writing in the latter book, it was a time in which all authorities, from king to Pope, and even God, could be challenged – ‘a period of glorious flux and intellectual excitement’ (Hill 1991: 14). In the 1960s, David Caute, himself a student of Hill’s, popularised this history in the novel *Comrade Jacob* (1961) and in a theatre production of the same name by John McGrath (1969). Perhaps the best-known treatment of the Diggers in the 1970s, is Brownlow and Mollo’s *Winstanley*, an account of the life the group’s leader Gerrard Winstanley (1609-76), which is based on Caute’s novel. *Winstanley* is a meticulously detailed film that incorporates some neo-Brechtian motifs (lengthy quotations from Winstanley’s writings; use of non-professional actors), but it is also stylistically akin to silent cinema with black-and-white cinematography recalling Eisenstein and Dreyer (Glaessner and Brownlow 1976).

Winstanley invokes an alternative tradition to the Right-wing notion of the British as the placid and happy country-folk of rural middle-England. For Hill, this pastoral ideal of the British landscape was nothing less than a lie:

Beneath the surface stability of rural England, then, the vast placid open fields which catch the eye, was the seething mobility of forest squatters, itinerant craftsmen and building labourers, unemployed men and women seeking work, strolling players, minstrels and jugglers, pedlars and quack doctors, gipsies, vagabonds, tramps. (1991: 48-49)

Thus, these historical writings and films form a critical attack on the image of the landscape, which Marxist art historians such as John Berger and John Barrell were analysing at this time in relation to traditions of landscape painting (Barrell 1980; Berger 1972). Among the most significant of these contemporaneous critiques of landscape was Berger's television series *Ways of Seeing* (BBC2, 1972), particularly the third episode, which examines Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (1750). The painting depicts a well-to-do husband and wife in a bucolic setting of fecund cornfields, which Berger analyzes in terms of property relations.

This critical social history of the British nation through its landscape was a rich subject for independent film. For example, Phil Mulloy's 1978 film *In the Forest*, made with support from the BFI Production Board, is a sweeping account of the oppression of outcasts and marginal peoples from the early medieval period to the nineteenth century, a history filled with 'rogues, vagabonds and beggars, roaming the countryside' (Hill 1991: 40). Tracing a social history in the landscape, the film opens with a figure dressed in period costume delivering a monologue on the riches of the nobility: 'Who do you think was the sources of these riches? This wealth, my friends, came from below'. In a scene set in the early Middle Ages, three figures, two men and

a woman of the lowest social stratum, stumble across a barren landscape, into a wood, where they find a wounded knight lying in a glade. A voice-over asks:

What does it mean to see a man in a medieval costume? Who is he? A knight dying in a forest. Can we represent a moment of history, the complexity of a moment. Absurd. What does it mean to you? The spectacle, the fantasy. [...]
There is a story told of how five faithful peasants found a wounded knight, home from the war [...] The king granted them their liberty. (Mulloy 1978)

With this last sentence, an etching appears on screen, a fantastical nineteenth-century depiction of a dying knight, lying in his bedchamber and surrounded by reverential and mournful women and servants. Given the previous events in the film, the image is nothing if not ironic. The film cuts back to a scene in which the peasants confront the knight and instead of helping him strip him of his armour and fool around gleefully. The merry band continues through the forest, and – in a cinematic temporal slip – years and centuries slide by. Now we see the group at the time of the Black Death (1348-49), listening to a Lollard preacher who declaims, ‘My friends the state of England cannot be right until everything is held communally, and until there is no institution between nobleman and serf, and we are all as one’.¹⁴ As the figures continue on their path through the forest, eras unfold: the birth of the bourgeoisie and Cromwell’s Roundheads; the enclosures of the eighteenth century; the formation of unions in the nineteenth century. The film concludes by informing us that ‘the rabble had transformed itself into a disciplined class’, thus arriving in a utopian moment with the promise for the future in which social agency is now in the hands of ‘the people’. It is an ending whose hopefulness seems oddly anachronistic, relying on an image of

class-consciousness that had, by the time of the production of *In The Forest* in 1978, become increasingly fraught.

References and tropes to English popular insurrection also appear in *Because I am King* (1980, Stewart Mackinnon/Trade Films). Here, actors deliver monologues to-camera from a range of sources, including the seventeenth-century Ranter Abiezer Coppe's tract 'A Fiery Flying Roll' (1649), a visionary text soaked with prophecies of the coming of the 'Leveller' and the end of days, while the camera pans across a landscape of housing and industry bordered by rolling hills. Later in the film, an actor dressed in Second World War military uniform walks through a woodland singing, the blistering words of William Blake's *Jerusalem*, railing against the 'dark satanic mills' of the industrial revolution and capitalism. The film also includes footage from an unnamed film made in Tyneside in 1943 capturing its industrial past, which it contrasts with the footage of the present (i.e. late 1970s) depressed, post-industrial conditions in the North East of England. These combinations of words and images set up a contrapuntal relation between past and present, nature and industry, with the countryside established not as a realm for pastoral escapism but rather as the terrain of nationalism, war, capitalism and industry.¹⁵ Earlier in the film, an actor reads from Brecht's 'Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties' (Brecht 1948), in which he unpicks the 'rotten, mystical associations' of the word 'Volk' as it was used under fascism.¹⁶ For Mulloy, likewise, it is clear that any notion of 'the people' as a geographically bound entity must give way to a Marxist understanding of class relations within conditions of property ownership, territory and landscape.

Films such as *Because I am King*, *In the Forest* and *Winstanley* can also be said to be examples of what Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* called the ‘counter-pastoral’ (Williams 1975). In Williams’s analyses, the poetic forms of the pastoral have evolved, from Virgil onwards, to obscure or allegorise the material conditions of labour and exploitation in the rural economy of an idealised ‘Old England’. For Williams, the rural landscape was, in fact, ‘[...]an economy directed, in all its working relations, to a physical and economic domination of a significantly total kind’ (Williams 1975: 37-38). In Williams’s analysis of Romantic and classical poetry and prose, there are also counter-pastoral literary traditions that foreground these socioeconomic conditions.

An independent film that explicitly references Williams’s counter-pastoral is Cinema Action’s *So That You Can Live*. Founded in 1968, the film-making collective Cinema Action was known for its activist documentaries supporting and giving voice to social struggle by unions, strikers, squatters and protesters.¹⁷ However, by the early 1980s, following Thatcher’s victory, a sense of retrospection, introspection and even melancholia had begun to grip many on the Left, and *So That You Can Live* expressed this mood-shift towards historical self-reflection. Broadcast on television as part of Channel 4’s independent film and video strand in 1982, the film was shot over five years in South Wales and recording the lives of Shirley and Roy Butts and their children Diane and Royston. The film documents the family’s experience within the labour market and their lives outside of it: Shirley’s involvement with a strike and her fight as part of a union for equal pay with men; her long unemployment; the family’s move to the countryside on a hill high above the town, and their attempt to sell goose eggs as Shirley says, ‘so that you can live’. There are motifs of landscape, the passing

of an industrial era and the threat of unemployment. Old industrial valleys once bursting with industry have greened over, but what is left is not an Eden, but rather a life of social fragmentation and diminished opportunities: Diane misses spending time with her grandmother in town, and eventually she moves to London to seek work.

The film is formally innovative, and might be contrasted with Mike Dibb's television film of *The Country and the City* for the BBC in 1979, in which Williams narrates and presents his arguments in a more traditional expository documentary form.¹⁸ *So that You Can Live* presents Williams's arguments in a complex intertextual form rich with citations. Throughout the film, we hear Diane reading out sections of texts from Williams's writing, including *The Country and the City*, *The Fight for Manod* (1979) and *Politics and Letters* (1979); indeed, Williams had been involved in aspects of the film's production, even writing texts for the beginning and end of the film. The work also experiments at the level of editing: where Cinema Action's earlier films were edited with rapid cuts recalling the camera-as-gun metaphor of late 1960s militant cinema, *So that You Can Live* is slower and more self-consciously cinematic. This perhaps reflects an attempt to accommodate some of the earlier criticisms levelled at the group in journals such as *Screen*.¹⁹

Despite Cinema Action's change of direction, *So that You Can Live* remained problematic for some critics. Writing in *Screen*, Mandy Merck and Sue Aspinall re-tread critiques of historical humanism developed in the Edinburgh Film Festival debates of 1977, arguing that the film suffers from a loss of the sense of contradiction between country and city found in Williams's writing. Instead, they found the film created 'an elegaic [sic] mood reminiscent of the Augustan idealisation of the obscure

countryman dwelling in rural simplicity' (Aspinall and Merck 1982: 159), harking back to a lost unity of class struggle and militancy – a unity that Aspinall and Merck suggest is based on a problematic notion of subjecthood. Certainly, *So that You Can Live* does not shy away from human sentiment, and features long-take shots of windswept landscapes and drab urban streets, and a haunting soundtrack by Robert Wyatt, Lindsay Cooper and Scritti Politti. Whether or not this can be equated with a simple elegy is less clear, for we may now also defend the film for its sensitivity to the affective conditions of post-industrial Britain. Nevertheless, these debates do reveal the ongoing tensions into the 1980s between different approaches of engaging with history in film. On the one hand, there were the practices rooted in oral testimony and documentary activism on the one hand; and on the other, the theorisation of audience passivity and activation that underpins much of the Lacanian and Althusserian film theory of the period.

Left and right nationalisms: Heritage, ethnicities and television

If cultural historians of the New Left used history as a tool in present struggles, they were nevertheless very often still caught up in the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). They were, in other words, often suffused in complex forms of Left nationalism, in which resistance and radicalism was rooted in the history of class struggles within a national-historical context. New Left historians such as Hill and Thompson thus sought not so much to undo the ideal of the nation, but rather to rebuild it to accommodate issues of persistent class struggle – finding in late 1960s militancy echoes of seventeenth century revolutionaries, for example.

Currents of radical Left nationalism were also evident on television. During the 1970s, British television was a complex site of both right-wing historical inscription, as well as of oppositional currents of nationalism inflected with currents of Marxist thought. For example, John McGrath's play *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black Oil*, was broadcast in 1974 on the BBC's *Play for Today* series (1970-1984). The film is an historical account of the exploitation of the land and natural resources in Scotland, mixing dramatic reconstructions of the late-eighteenth-century Highland Clearances with documentary interviews with workers involved in the contemporaneous drilling for oil in the North Sea. Such work can be understood partly in terms of the oppositional nationalism and regionalism of the time in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, when the 'Break-up of Britain' was being theorised by Tom Nairn.²⁰ Another programme broadcast on *Play for Today* in the same year was *Penda's Fen*, directed by Alan Clarke (1974), which explores ideas of Englishness and sexual awakening in relation to the pagan history of the English landscape. Both *The Cheviot* and *Penda's Fen* fit within the earlier discussion of Williams' 'counter-pastoral', critical rethinking the nation's landscape, which nevertheless draws on a yearning for identities rooted in place.

However, these counter-pastoral histories, rooted in specific national experiences, could also be seen as exclusionary, particular in terms of the transnational experience of migrants, and an assumption, in relation to television, of a homogenous ethnically white-British audience through the 1970s, particularly in the news and in sitcoms (Malik 2002).²¹ Notably, the failure of British public service television to cater for diverse audiences would become a major political issue in the 1970s, with a governmental committee (the Annan Committee) charged with investigating the

possibilities of a fourth Channel. When Channel 4 was finally launched in 1982, it had an explicit remit to cater for diverse audiences often along lines of identity, with new strands created for Black audiences, and a whole regional channel for Welsh speakers (S4C). Television was thus both the site of the construction of reactionary notions of national belonging, but also increasingly in the 1980s, a field in which counter-discourses could be seen and heard.

William's counter-pastoral was also played out on Channel 4 after it was launched in 1982. Alan Fountain and Rod Stoneman, the new heads of Channel 4's Independent Film and Video department set out to schedule a series of programmes that would rethink the past in the context of the Thatcherite onslaught. This was a time in which the Falklands War dominated the news, with the British Government and the media stirring up nationalist triumphalism and xenophobia directed at the 'Argies' (Gilroy 1987, 51). Against these currents, Channel 4's *The Eleventh Hour* slot – which each week at 11pm on Mondays showed a different film commissioned or purchased from independent producers – opened with a series of programmes that in this 'exceptionally jingoistic era' constituted 'an attempt at presenting Britain and British history in a more diverse and engaging way' (Fountain 1982: 5). Fountain's argument was thus not so much an anti-nationalist one, as an attempt to rethink the nation through pluralistic and politically progressive lines. *The Eleventh Hour* was in a sense reactive, by setting out to present independent work in response to dominant right-wing historical narratives, elisions and omissions.

In its first weeks of broadcast, *The Eleventh Hour* presented a number of films that explored the historical representation of women in struggle: films that '[...] generally

take unexplored areas of Britain and question the representations that are employed in conventional cinema and television in order to present us with images of archetypal Britishness' (Fountain 1982: 5). Films shown included: *So That You Can Live*; *Song of the Shirt*, Noël Burch's *The Year of the Bodyguard*, a dramatised history of the Suffragette's use of martial arts; Mulvey and Wollen's *Amy!*, a film on the self image and media portrayal of the female aviator Amy Johnson; and Lezli-Ann Barrett's *Epic Poem* (1982), a film examining male conceptions of love through art and poetry. These films explored the representation of women in the context of patriarchy; but in the programming of *The Eleventh Hour*, they were re-positioned in light of a rethinking of the national past (Amy Johnson in the context of this programming schedule, could be seen as a British heroine). Alongside these feminist-influenced independent films were earlier works such as *Industrial Britain* (1931, dir. Robert Flaherty), a film that lyrically romanticises Britain's industrial workers as craftsmen; and *Miss Grant Goes to The Door* (1940, dir. Brian Desmond Hurst), a wartime propaganda film in which two English women capture a German spy. These latter were presented as examples of 'state funded cinema' (Fountain, 1982: 5), and thus as eminent precursor to a non-commercial sector that many in the independent film and video sector had been advocating since the mid-1970s.²²

Channel 4 also disputed Thatcherite 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 1979: 15) in relation to anti-colonialist and national-revolutionary struggles. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, most socialist struggles have taken place in a complex relationship to nationalism, often harnessing it for revolutionary purposes (Anderson 1991: 2-3), and it is evident from Channel 4's scheduling that a counter-discourse against Thatcher's jingoism had taken just such a form. Part of the original outline for

The Eleventh Hour series of programmes titled ‘Ireland: the Silent Voices’ included films on Britain’s neo-colonial presence in Ireland. The series was intended as an active intervention into Thatcher’s increasingly censorious attitudes towards the presence on television of Irish nationalist voices (interviews with Sinn Féin members were legally required to be dubbed from 1988 to 1994) (Fountain 1982: 7). Broadcast in 1983, the series included Bob Quinn’s *Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire/Lament for Art O’Leary* (1974), a neo-Brechtian response to the eighteenth-century English colonisation (‘plantation’) of Ireland as well as a defence of Irish republicanism and anti-imperialist Irish nationalism.²³ While Thatcher actively supported Augusto Pinochet’s regime in Chile, Channel 4 broadcast a series of Third Cinema films on struggles against neo-colonial power, including Patricio Guzmán’s *Battle of Chile* (1974/79). And while the Tory government stirred up xenophobic sentiments, the channel’s *People to People* strand programmed ‘people’s history’ films centred on diverse ‘communities of interest’ (Caroline Spry in Fountain 1986: n.p.), focussing on the experiences of women, Irish, Asians and Afro-Caribbeans.

Channel 4 also challenged the New Right’s historical horizons in the *The Lie of the Land* series in 1987 (the pun in the series’ title suggests that the nationalist ideal is a lie). The series consisted of nine independent films or videos, and can be considered as a critical, counter-pastoral discourse in televisual form. For example, the passage of time and the decline of the North of England are the focus of *The End of the Pier* (1986, dir. David Eadington; prod. Amber), a portrait of a faded Victorian town (Saltburn-by-the-Sea); and *North* (1986, dir. Maxim Ford; prod. Trade Films), a wordless, visual portrait of industrial and post-industrial labour, with contrasting images of remaining steelworks and clothes factories in the north and the new sight of

frantic trading in London's stock exchanges. The essayistic *Thames Film* (1986, dir. William Raban) depicts the historical, layered, and changing face of London's post-industrial bankside since the eighteenth century.

Amongst the other films broadcast, Richard Philpott's video *Spirit of Albion* (1987) makes visible a counter-public that has itself coalesced around notions of freedom rooted in pagan-mystic traditions, going back to an imagined past before systems of private property and capitalism corrupted 'Albion'. Philpot's work mixes documentary footage and audio samples, depicting contemporary New Age Travellers on their way to Stonehenge, artist Bruce Lacey performing a ritualistic ceremony at a music festival, readings of seventeenth-century Millenarian revolutionary texts, and a pounding industrial synth-soundtrack by groups including the 'Red Wedge' band Test Department. Here, it is abundantly clear that the Left also has its imagined communities, that are rooted in conceptions of a history that 'loom out of an immemorial past' (Anderson 1991: 11). The New Age movement documented here is depicted by Philpott very much as an extension of the 'back to the land' movement of the 1960s, albeit fused with a pop-video sensibility redolent of London's alternative club and video art scene of the 1980s, and of the dystopian iconography of Derek Jarman's 1980s music videos for groups from Throbbing Gristle to The Smiths. Indeed, we may trace here a shift in counter-pastoral aesthetic from the use of neo-Brechtian motifs of estrangement in the 1970s in works such as *Because I am King*, to an ever-greater immersion in sensations and audio-visual pleasures in the 1980s in *Spirit of Albion*. 'The Lie of the Land' series is thus an ambivalent moment, one in which a romantic vision of the past opens up to subaltern pleasure in the landscape, at

the same time as it forms a vision of the past that seems to run from contemporary socio-political conditions.

Other films shown as part of the 'The Lie of the Land' more constructively focussed on transnational issues of racism and neo-colonialism in Britain and elsewhere: *Bring it all Back Home* (1987, dir. Chrissie Stansfield) is a film about the exploitation of women workers in the third world and the globalisation of trade; *An Environment of Dignity* (1987, dir. Mahmood Jamal) is an account of issues of race and housing in Britain; and *Sanctuary Challenge* (1986, dir. John Akomfrah) is an account of refugees struggling to escape deportation in Britain. Also shown as part of the series was Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, a film on the 'riots' in the Handsworth area of Birmingham and the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, London, in 1985, and in Brixton, London in 1981. *Handsworth Songs* has been extensively discussed within film and cinema studies, often in terms of transcultural or embodied memory, archives, remediation and the essay film, and as both a key work in independent film and in the new Black British cinema.²⁴ The film can also be seen as a specific intervention against Left histories that invoked 'immanent' oppositional identities centred on land, class or race (ideas based on the land returning to 'the people', who are assumed to have Anglo-Saxon or Celtic ethnicities). In a text produced for the 'Black Film/British Cinema' conference at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 1988, Kobena Mercer argues that the film sets out to '[...] reclaim and excavate a creole countermemory of black struggle in Britain, itself always repressed, erased and made invisible in the "popular memory" of dominant film and media discourse' (Mercer 1994: 61).

Reflecting on the context in which *Handsworth Songs* was made, Stuart Hall has argued that: 'There can [...] be no simple 'return' or 'recovery' of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present' (Hall in Chen and Morley 1996: 449). The film is thus understandable within a trajectory of political modernist historiographical critique of popular memory by Heath, MacCabe and Johnston in the 1970s, rethought through conditions of racism in the 1980s. Paul Gilroy has also usefully pointed out that the deep entwinement of nationalism and racism poses fundamental challenges to notions of identity to the Left as well as to the Right (Gilroy 1987: 20). Gilroy shows how even champions of the New Left such as Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm deploy a radical Englishness (or Britishness) at the expense of cultural difference (Gilroy 1987: 50); a conception that Gilroy calls 'ethnic absolutism' (Gilroy 1987: 59).

Against this form of ethnic absolutism, *Handsworth Songs* stresses the possibilities of the emergence of new intercultural subjectivities emerging from 'routes' rather than 'roots' (Gilroy 1993: 19). Here, the urban British landscape is passed over by an ever-mobile camera and lyrically edited to produce a migratory image of the landscape that is fractured and incomplete. *Handsworth's* montage of images and sounds thus suggests a protean sense of identity, one that can be fragmented and recombined, as against the rhetoric of black cultural nationalisms that assumes that identity is formed on the basis of a racialized essence (Gilroy 1987: 39; Fusco 1988: 42). Coco Fusco has argued that the post-war and post-industrial era is a time in which 'Britain, specifically, and Western Europe in general, is involved in a larger postcolonial crisis that has forced them to rethink national and cultural identity' (Fusco 1988: 20). For Homi Bhaba, this crisis results not simply in the exclusion of large demographic

groups from a defensive image of 'British character', but rather invokes a sense of 'double-time' in which the nation is strained between two poles of stable tradition and globalised modernity (Bhabha 1994). The temporality of *Handsworth Songs* is one that does not slip into a fantasy of an immemorial past, but rather sets up a dialogue with a recent present, with histories and memories of colonialism and migration that feed directly into the present.

If *Handsworth Songs* has been discussed at length in film and cultural studies, far less attention has been given to its specific broadcasting context on Channel 4. The film was clearly made within and in reaction to a great deal of news reporting and current affairs debate on the civil unrest in London and Birmingham between 1981 and 1985.²⁵ My suggestion here is that the film's significance for television is its counter-pastoral critique of the unity of place and identity, and a re-articulation of urban space as fragmentary and mobile. For example, the guerrilla-style footage of television and news reporters, and of protesters ducking and diving from police, reveals urban spatial dynamics of protest and unrest.²⁶ Another sequence critiques television's articulation of space as a televisual spectacle, with footage recorded just prior to a televised debate on the 'riots' for an edition of the current-affairs programme *TV Eye* (1985, Thames Television), in which the producer and floor manager discuss apparent problems of light balance for recording the predominantly Black audience. The film is thus an intervention into the ideological complicity of television news in policing and the state in which community meetings are stage-managed as spectacle and where the television industry's standards reveal their preference for white audiences.²⁷

Handsworth Songs builds a damning critique of the geographical basis of racism in which landscapes and geographies are used to delineate natives from migrants. The film includes infamous footage recorded by Granada TV's *World in Action* in 1978, in which Thatcher talks to-camera about the country being 'swamped' by immigrants. The soon-to-be Prime Minister asserts that it is only natural that the 'British character' might be hostile to the arrival of large numbers of immigrants since this is 'a British country with British characteristics'. *Handsworth Songs* deploys further archival footage referencing this sense of marginalisation within the British urban landscape. The film's most famous quote that 'there are no stories in the riots, only the ghost of other stories' is swiftly made concrete with a specific historic example of injustice and struggle. A voice-over tells us: 'Enoch Powell telling us in 1969 that we don't belong [...] Malcolm X visiting us in 1965'.²⁸ In one sequence, an Afro-Caribbean man walks along a street in Smethwick, with an old newsreel voice-over announcing that there are 'nearly a million more like him in Britain today, and the white natives are distinctly unhappy about it' (the cheery voice-over utterly fails to condemn this 'native' position).

It is important to note here that *Handsworth Songs*, was part of a renewed context of television that was increasingly recognising the diversity of audiences in Britain, with Channel 4 running a number of magazine programmes for Black audiences, including *Black on Black* (1982-85), *Eastern Eye* (1982-85) and *Bandung File* (1985-89); the BBC also broadcast a strand called *Ebony*. At the same time, it is clear that *Handsworth Songs* shared formal qualities with other programmes in the 'Lie of the Land' series, tapping into traditions of documentary redolent of Flaherty's *Industrial Britain* or John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929). A similar 'poetic' aesthetic is also evident

in other films in the series, although there are differences in the ways in which these tend to hypostasise the image of the landscape, either in relation to New Age cultures (*Spirit of Albion*) or as elegiac backdrops for the disenfranchised working class (*End of the Pier* and *North*). Nevertheless, commonalities are evident: *Spirit of Albion*, in particular, works to a logic seemingly emerging from the soundtrack, rather than through exposition or a conventional narrative arc. *Handsworth Songs* also cites sources of oppositional culture, including William Blake's 'Jerusalem' (an extraordinary 1982 dub version by Mark Stewart and the Mafia), which is also quoted in *Spirit of Albion* and other earlier independent films including *Because I am King*.²⁹ *Handsworth Songs* may be a radical and extraordinarily inventive film, but it evidently draws much of its cultural capital from existing oppositional developments within both television and independent film. It is, then, not only a film of rich relevance today, but also a film of its time.

Conclusion: questions of the national past today

Over the last three decades, in the midst of disorientating global and transnational forces, the ideology of nations has come to seem increasingly anachronistic. We are all in some way in the grips of forces wider than nations: the global operations of corporations, free trade agreements, NGOs, as well as of communication networks, not to mention the chaos of ecological change. Responding to these forces, since the 1990s, much critical attention has been rightly given to the migrant figure, within specific film and video works by artists such as Ursula Biemann and Mieke Bal, in biennials and film festivals, and in a growing body of art criticism and art-historical writing.³⁰ Issues of nationalism as historical and geographically rooted ideas seem to

be forces to be overcome, to be superseded with new subjectivities based on border crossings and transnational communications; landscapes are not wellsprings of identity, but images glimpsed on the move (another inflection in the meaning of the ‘moving image’). Whereas from the 1970s to 1990s the issue of landscape could be unpicked in terms of ideologies of power (class, state), today much critical discourse is centred on the global crisis of the Anthropocene.³¹

Of course, globalism and nationalism are deeply interlinked. Over the past year, we have witnessed the horror of revanchist nationalism with the Brexit referendum and the rise of Trump and the ‘alt-right’ in the USA, as well as the threat of further right-wing shifts across Europe. Today’s resurgence of xenophobia and racism is, perversely, partly a product of the global shifts of capital and neoliberalism: particularly, the uneven shifts of economic strength from the West to the East (from the USA to China), and the continued evisceration of the global south and the destabilising ravages of climate change. The migrant, therefore, continues to be a vital figure for the understanding of the sociopolitics of the nation, particularly in anxieties over unstable employment conditions and cultural difference. Indeed, there is a large body of work that directly addresses the labouring conditions of workers, both in artists moving image and in mainstream documentary.³²

But it is now important to not only register migrant labour and its visibility, but also situate the ideological effects of shifting labour patterns within cultural forms such as television, the cinema and online media. This article has detailed how independent film and video in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain used the past to rethink the present, particularly in relation to issues of national history as they are communicated through

landscape. The question is important in particular in this current issue of *MIRAJ*, which both examines and memorialises fifty years of moving image culture in Britain. The discourses on nation and landscape described here both re-inscribe and disturb ideas of national culture(s), situating radical film culture in the context of counter-pastoral traditions, left-wing nationalist tendencies and in international intellectual debate. It is also worth addressing this historiographical issue because problems of nationhood and belonging remain vital and urgent sociopolitical concerns today. For, if nations are ‘imagined’ they nevertheless produce real and present forms of ideology. An understanding of the historical self-conception of nations is, therefore, vital for critical investigations into the troubles of the present.

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Notes

¹ These issues of media bias were extensively discussed during the period, particularly with the work of the Glasgow Media Group, the writings of Stuart Hood, and within media activist groups such as the Media Workers Group and the Independent Filmmakers' Association.

² The distinction between these groups is blurred, as there were many fertile connections. For example, the Independent Filmmakers' Association, an advocacy group for independent film, included members such as Wollen and Mulvey as well as Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal.

³ Alexander Korda's historical costume dramas of kings, queens and chivalry were replayed frequently throughout both the 1970s and the 1980s as a schedule-filler on the BBC. A series of Korda's films was shown on BBC-2 in 1986, for example.

⁴ Examples of what Andrew Higson calls the 'heritage film' include *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Gandhi* (1982) and *A Passage to India* (1984, dir. David Lean), and the Merchant-Ivory films *A Room with a View* (1986), *A Handful of Dust* (1987) and *Maurice* (1987). See: Higson, Andrew ([1993] 2006), 'Re-Presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.) *Fires Were Started: British Cinema And Thatcherism*, London: Wallflower Press, pp. 91–109.

⁵ Thatcher announced this in an interview for London Weekend Television on 16 January 1983. Raphael Samuel has critiqued this term in depth. See: Samuel, Raphael and Christopher Smout (1992), 'Mrs. Thatcher's Return to Victorian Values', *Proceedings of the British Academy: Victorian Values*, pp.789–29. Available online at: <http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/proc/volumes/pba78.html>. Accessed 14 November 2016.

⁶ For example, Rowbotham was on the editorial board of *Black Dwarf*, a radical socialist publication, which existed from 1968 to 1972.

⁷ Historical discourse frequently coalesced around the publishing activities of key public intellectuals, from Raymond Williams to Thompson and Rowbotham. For an account of the role of the New Left public intellectual in Britain, see: Stefan Collini (2006), *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford: OUP.

⁸ See, for example, Noël Carroll's *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (1988, New York: Columbia University Press). More recently, Jacques Rancière has also contributed to this assertion of the agency of the viewer in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009, London: Verso).

⁹ See in particular Althusser and Etienne Balibar's *Reading Capital* (1970)

¹⁰ In the same publication, Steven Heath argues against currents of ‘people’s memory’, arguing that it constituted a form of ‘intellectual nostalgia’, and calls for ‘[...] new ways of thinking the historical involvement of film’ (Heath, 1977: 42). While few actual films existed that could fulfil the stringent criteria **of a non-empirical engagement with history**, Straub–Huillet’s *Fortini/Cani* (1976) was screened at the 1977 Festival (but not part of the History/Production/Memory event), with its script published in 1978 in *Screen* (Straub and Huillet, 1978), as an exemplar of an approach to history that radically broke with conventions of the classic realist text.

¹¹ This would develop into a spat between Althusserian theorists and E.P. Thompson, with the latter responding vehemently to Althusser’s criticisms of historical methods in his book *The Poverty of Theory: Or an Orrery of Errors* (1978, New York: Monthly Review Press).

¹² Brecht’s Epic Theatre was often concerned with rearticulating historical events for contemporary concerns. For example, *Mother Courage* (1939) is set during the [Thirty Years’ War](#) of 1618–1648, but its central concern is the rise of fascism in the twentieth century.

¹³ These include such topics as the Suffragettes, union militancy in the 1920s and 1930s, and radical dissenting groups such as the Diggers, Ranters and Levellers of seventeenth-century England, some of whom set up independent communities on common grazing land and rejected property systems outright, thus directly challenging the ruling classes over land rights and ownership.

¹⁴ The speech is a quote from John Ball, the leader of the 1381 Peasant Revolt.

¹⁵ **These are themes also explored within the British Documentary Film Movement of the 1930s–1950s, which had a complex relationship to issues of landscape and nationalism. While Robert Flaherty idealised images of unspoiled wilderness and ancient ways of life, others such as John Grierson and (later) Lindsay Anderson were often concerned with reconciling images of the land and industry, depicting a modern, industrial state operating in harmony with nature.**

¹⁶ If the first half of *Because I am King* centres on these notions of landscape and labour, the second half consists of a lengthy depiction of a new performance of the Brecht–Hindemith *Lehrstück* of 1929, by the Northern Sinfonia Orchestra of Tyneside staged in a hangar-like former industrial building.

¹⁷ **These groups were not the first workers’ or militant film groups in the UK. See for example the work of the distributors Kino and the Worker’s Film Association in the 1930s, and of filmmakers such as Ralph Bond or Ivor Montagu.**

¹⁸ See: Mike Dibbs, *The Country and The City (Where We Live Now)* (BBC, 23 February 1979). Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XCjBTloxcA.

Accessed: 23 January 2017.

¹⁹ For example, Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen had cautiously praised Cinema Action's *Miners' Film* (1975) as progressive, albeit stuck in a realist framework, and contrasted it with the Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners*, which for them was a model for a new form of Brechtian cinema in Britain (Johnston and Willemen 1975: 104).

²⁰ Nairn's influential 1977 book concerned issues of imperialism, nationalism and devolution, specifically within the context of the UK. See: Nairn, Tom ([1977] 2015), *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing.

²¹ These stereotypes were particularly evident in sitcoms such as *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972-1976) and *Rising Damp* (ITV, 1974-1978).

²² For example, the Independent Filmmakers' Association, a major pressure group initially including figures such as Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, Marc Karlin as well as Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal, had argued since the mid-1970s for state sponsorship of alternative forms of cinema and access for radical film-makers to television.

²³ Other films in the 1983 Channel 4 Ireland series included: *Ireland: The Silent Voices* (1983, dir. Rod Stoneman), a documentary on British media-bias about Ireland; the drama *Maeve* (1981, dirs. Mat Murphy and John Davies); and the community drama project *The Writing on the Wall* (1981, dir. Armand Gatti). Also transmitted in 1983 was *The Cause of Ireland* (1983, Chris Reeves/Platform Films).

²⁴ Recent texts on *Handsworth Songs* include: Brunow, Dagmar (2015) *Remediating Transcultural Memory: Documentary Filmmaking as Archival Intervention*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter; Fisher, Mark (2012), 'What Is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66:1, pp. 6–24; Eshun, Kodwo (2009), 'The Disenchantments of Reflexivity in Handsworth Songs', in Sven Kramer & Thomas Tode (eds.) *Der Essay film: Ästhetik und Aktualität*, Konstanz: UVK; Marks, Laura. U. (2000), *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham: Duke University Press.

²⁵ Other programmes on the riots include: *Bombin'* (Central Television, 1988), *Viewpoint 86: After the Riots* (Central Television, 1986), *Central Weekend* (Central Independent Television, September 1986), *Opinions: Misrule Britannia – The Future of Our Inner Cities* (Panoptic Productions/Channel 4, 1986), *TV Eye: The Birmingham Riots* (Thames Television, 1985) and *Weekend World: After the Riots* (London Weekend Television, 1985).

²⁶ Some of *Handsworth Song's* reportage-style footage had been filmed by the Black film collective Ceddo. Ceddo's film *The People's Account* (1985), which examines the

Broadwater Farm events in Tottenham, London, in 1981, had been censored by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. See: 'Ceddo: *The People's Account*', *ICA Documents*, no. 7 (1988): pp. 58-59.

²⁷ This sequence has been analysed by Richard Dyer in terms of the concept of 'whiteness'. See: Dyer, Richard ([1997] 2013), *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London: Routledge, pp.18-92.

²⁸ Smethwick is a town on the edges of Birmingham where many African and Asian migrants settled in the post-war era. The British fascist leader Oswald Mosley was the MP for Smethwick between 1926 and 1931. The U.S. civil rights leader Malcolm X visited Smethwick on a trip to the UK shortly before he was assassinated in 1965.

²⁹ Subversive uses of 'Jerusalem' can also be found in Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and Lindsay Anderson's *If* (1968). In the 1980s, post-punk and dub versions included Mark Stewart and the Mafia's 'Jerusalem' (1982), and The Fall's 'Dog is Life/Jerusalem' (1988). 'Jerusalem' is also deployed for more jingoistic purposes on the soundtrack of *Chariots of Fire* (1981, Hugh Hudson), at the Last Night of the Proms, and in the wartime propaganda film *Listen to Britain* (1942, Humphrey Jennings).

³⁰ See, for example: Demos, T. J. 2013. *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. These writings and practices should be understood in the context of other moving image practices focussed also on the migrant image, such as the extraordinary documentary *Last Train Home* (2009, dir. Lixin Fan), on the annual return home of millions of workers for Chinese New Year.

³¹ See: Demos, T.J. 2015. 'Against the Anthropocene'. Available online:

https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/27013_against_the_anthropocene. Accessed: 23 January 2017.

³² Silke Panse also provides a very useful discussion of the depiction of labour, including migrant labour, in the moving image, citing works such as *Tulare Road* (James Benning, 2010), *Double Tide* (Sharon Lockhart, 2010) and *The Gleaners and I* (Agnès Varda, 2000). See: Panse, Silke, 'The Work of the Documentary Protagonist The Material Labor of Aesthetics', in Juhasz, Alexandra, and Alisa Lebow (2015) (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 155–175.