Anthony Simmons*: Black Joy*

Black Joy (1977) richly deserves to be recognised as a landmark film, yet for decades it was overlooked in histories of British cinema and its importance almost forgotten. The film can be counted amongst the first British features to employ an all-black cast, with Norman Beaton becoming the first black actor to gain a prestigious award when the Variety Club of Great Britain named him 'Actor of the Year' for his performance of hustler, Dave King. As Beaton says, '…it was the most wonderful moment of my life. I had disproved the claim "They can't act. There are no black actors"' (Pines 1992: 114). *Black Joy* is also significant because it preserves the work of Jamal Ali, who with Norman Beaton and Rufus Collins had led the Black Theatre of Brixton from 1975, and who collaborated with director Anthony Simmons on the adaptation for the screen of his original stage play, *Dark Days and Light Nights*. Equally, *Black Joy* remains one of the few films to depict the everyday lives of Britain's Afro-Caribbean diaspora as Simmons aimed to represent his admiration for the resilience and optimism of Brixton's immigrant community that, for him, was a potent reminder of the Jewish London East-end of his youth. Through Simmons's pursuit of that aim, *Black Joy* illuminates the dynamics of race and gender that cut across a black community dominated by a white hegemony.

Typically for this era, the film was produced on a very limited budget, roughly £300, 000, though as Simmons was later to recall,

> … it didn't have to be something cheap and nasty, like the sex films that were then current. And that was why we chose [Brixton]. I wanted the East End I knew had gone. We were looking for a milieu in London which had the same atmosphere (Dolan and Spicer 2009: 141).

Adopting picaresque conventions, the story commences at Heathrow airport with the arrival from Guyana of country boy Ben Jones (Trevor Thomas). It goes on to trace his journey of adjustment to city life enabled by the support of community as he experiences the injustices of institutional racism and learns to counter the predations of local hustlers, Dave and Devon (Paul J. Medford), a latter-day 'artful dodger' who is the son of Dave's lover, Miriam (Floella Benjamin). In this way, *Black Joy* deftly establishes both the rich multiplicity of Brixton's Afro-Caribbean diaspora and the repeated incursions of white power and prejudice on British black communities. Consequently, the film can be seen to pre-figure Stuart Hall's argument that 'it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention' (Hall 1997: 131).

Simmons's creative attention was firstly influenced by the British Documentary Movement, especially the poetic realism of Humphrey Jennings, and was later fostered in post-World War Two Rome where he learned about location shooting and verité techniques by watching neo-realist film-makers at work. Such influences shaped his early documentary films about Cockney culture, *Sunday by the Sea* (1953) and *Bow Bells* (1954). At the time, the reception of these films was overshadowed by the prominence of the Free Film Movement spearheaded by Lyndsay Anderson's *O Dreamland* (1953), a film that Simmons thought to present 'a rather sour, hostile look at the same subject' (Dolan and Spicer, 2009). Recent critical reappraisals tend to support this comparison and consider that Simmons's lesser-known films offer 'an insider's vision of working class conviviality' (Chanan quoted in Russell 2016) and to be 'artistically and morally superior' to Anderson's canonised effort (Russell 2016). Similar blends of location shooting and affectionate engagement with cinematically neglected subjects trace through Simmons's subsequent feature films, *Four in the Morning* (1965), *The Optimists of Nine Elms* (1973) and *Black Joy* that variously depict the cultural specificity of different London communities.

From the outset, Simmons displayed a trademark sensitivity to soundtrack, frequently synchronising carefully framed images with vernacular or popular songs in order to choreograph on-screen emotional and cultural registers. This technique is exemplified in *Black Joy* where a compilation soul and reggae soundtrack from now canonised performers such as Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Jimmy Helms and Billy Paul play a crucial role in the film's construction of place, as well as its narration of Ben's transformation from country boy to city slicker. Released as an album, *Black Joy*'s soundtrack charted in its own right, rapidly earning a platinum disc and accruing a collectible kudos for the original vinyl album. Unfortunately, rather than supporting the film's economic success, the soundtrack proved to be its downfall since performing rights had not been obtained and the film was forced out of circulation. Four years elapsed before the legal wrangle was resolved and, by then, the film's relevance and profit potential had passed (Dolan and Spicer 2010: 89).

Just as Simmons's early output was marginalised from the Free Film Movement, and later the British New Wave, *Black Joy* has largely been isolated the critical legacies of 1970s black cinema, and by extension, from its canon. In part, this stems from interpretative frameworks split between concerns with black stereotypes deployed by white producers of both inter-war 'Empire' and post-Windrush 'social problem' films; or those affirming the significance of films like *Pressure* (Ové 1975) and *Burning an Illusion* (Shabazz 1981) that claim to offer authentic representations of black experiences and political activism (Dolan and Spicer 2010: 87-88). *Black Joy* quite simply refuses such pigeon-holing, not least because Simmons's own Jewish background places him amongst those various fair-skinned groups excluded from hegemonic white identity (Dyer 1997: 11-12), while that same fair skin marked his difference from Brixton's Afro-Caribbean community. Crucially, the formal properties of the film offer an unsettling commentary on white privilege and power. In the opening sequence, Ben's arrival at Heathrow is blighted by a hostile immigration officer; by racist assumptions that his cash is the undoubted fruit of criminality and by the indignity and injustice of a 'routine' rectal examination. Throughout, the audience is uncomfortably positioned as witnesses to the events. That discomfort is later reiterated when London tourist sites are juxtaposed to the wasteland of Brixton's demolished streets in a telling commentary on the racialised distribution of economic and cultural capital in 1970s Britain; and when an isolated Ben wanders the Brixton wasteland with only police 'stop and search' activities for company. In a reversal of usual practices, stereotyping is centred on white officialdom and effectively exposes the prevalence of institutionalised racism.

Yet *Black Joy* cannot be seen as a depiction of black solidarity against white oppressions, even though it unsettles the prevailing stereotype of the 'passive black' by adapting for British screens the generic conventions of 1970s U.S. blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (Parks 1971). Of particular note in this adaptation is the high degree of social agency afforded to characters who survive set-backs, changing and developing as the story unfolds: characters with aspirations and plans for better economic futures. Ultimately though, the film's 'subject-matter, characters and milieu are very much part of a romanticised view of the ghetto' (Pines 1992: 7) shored up by 'the urban black male's attempts to survive in a hostile environment' (Young 1996: 151). Rather than being an expression of solidarity, that survival is predicated on the exploitation of the vulnerable, such as Ben before he too is incorporated into a 'dog eat dog' way of being. Or equally, as Illuminated by Dave's reliance on hand-outs from Miriam, women are also props to male survival. But to see this divisive pattern of survival as a critique of black male behaviour would be highly reductive. *Black Joy* was produced at a time when men like Ben and Dave were readily criminalised and, as now, more likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts. At the time this was reinterpreted by black activists as a political act of 'refusal to work' (Hall et. al. 1978: 37).

Unsurprisingly then, in 1970s and 1980s black cinema, the young male became emblematic of both racist Britain and black resistance to that racism.

As in *Black Joy*, this then complicated attitudes to black working women such as Miriam whose earning power is held in counterpoint to the institutionalised poverty of black men excluded from breadwinner status and family responsibilities. Even as black women were replacing male breadwinners, they were also held responsible by the popular press for failing to control the alleged transgressions of partners, husbands, brothers and sons and were thus branded as bad wives, sisters and mothers, thereby shaping attitudes to their paid work outside the home. Where white working wives or mothers would probably be seen sympathetically, in terms of feminist success, noteworthy enterprise or complex multi-tasking, black women's work was most likely diagnosed as symptom, cause and evidence of an endemic failure to properly parent children and to effectively regulate deviant males. Such attitudes are articulated in *Black Joy*, when Dave accuses Miriam of neglecting Devon, of failing to manage the 6 year old's delinquent behaviour. While this could be seen as straightforward hypocrisy by Dave, it also needs to be recognised that the film is expressing the complexity of family life split between aspirations and ambition for a better future and the limiting realities of a racialised urban environment.

Even further complexity is added to the film's racial politics by the sexual inferences of fractured family lives - single mothers, absent fathers and live-out lovers. For centuries, racist white culture has categorised the black body as hyper-sexual and positioned it as a threat to racial purity due to either the exotic allure of black women or the violent menace of black men. Simultaneously, discourses of black hyper-sexuality legitimated racist white diagnoses of promiscuity, overpopulation and fractured family lives within black communities. These residual, but widespread, racist anxieties fuelled 1970s social concerns about the 'race (i.e. black) problem' and firmly deflected attention away from white privilege. Understandably, black film scholars argue that at best *Black Joy* panders 'to white society's prurient interest in certain aspects of black social life' (Rugg quoted in Young 151), and at worst it reiterates some of the most persistent manifestations of racism. Though convincing in their own terms, such arguments neglect the discourses of sexual liberation that were re-shaping heteronormative landscapes: neglect fractures within a white culture that was never monolithically racist: and neglect the exchanges of hybridity that fostered the appeal of Afro fashions, reggae and soul. In short, it is possible to see *Black Joy* as a vehicle for racist white disdain of black culture. But it is equally possible to recognise a context of white racism and privilege within which *Black Joy* expresses an outsider's appreciation for, and a joyful celebration of, Britain's Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

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