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IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 01: BODIES & MEDIA

The Utopian Promise: John Akomfrah's Poetics of the Archive

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John Akomfrah's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2012) bookend the British filmmaker's career in a uniquely political sense. Both are implicitly concerned with the film archive, with the potential it accorded for poetic and political ends. Stuart Hall famously responded to the criticism of *Handsworth Songs* by Salman Rushdie at the time of the film's release, championing the Black Audio Film Collective, which Akomfrah was a founding member of, in their attempts to forge a new cinematic language to represent post-migrant minorities. Akomfrah's method, in both films, is interesting in this regard; using archival footage, it constructs a collage-based film used to challenge hegemonic constructions of sound and image with regard to political representation in film. This article addresses this method. It takes the 'utopian promise', which Akomfrah associates with the archive, as a starting point to explore the theoretical alignment between the archival image and the future. As a result, the article pushes against responses to Akomfrah films that have sought to situate their content as exclusively concerned with issues of political representation in the present, exploring an Akomfrah poetics that comes out of a utopian tradition of thought concerned with thinking about the future; or at least, the possibilities of the future.

Publisher's Note

This article contains two citations in which the authors' surnames have been misspelled:

> - Rajinder Dudrah is misspelled as "Rajinder Dudrad" in the text and in the
>
> reference list entry **Dudrad, R** (2015).
>
> - Eshun, K and Sagar, A are misspelled as "Oshun, K" and "Sager, A" in the
>
> reference list entries **Enwezor, O** (2007); and **Fisher, J** (2007).

These mistakes have been left in place as part of OLH's publication ethics.

Article

The archive, especially the moving image archive, comes to us with a set of Janus-faced possibilities. It says, "I existed at one point and it's possible that I could exist differently". But in order to find that you need something else, which is not in the archive, which is the philosophy of montage. Montage allows the possibility of reengagement, of the return to the image with renewed purpose, a different ambition – John Akomfrah.

> You and me, what does that mean?
>
> Always, what does that mean?
>
> Forever, what does that mean?
>
> It means we'll manage,
>
> I'll master your language,
>
> And in the meantime,
>
> I'll create my own,
>
> By my own,
>
> Tricky, *Christiansands.*

A central concern of the keynote speech given by the British filmmaker John Akomfrah (director of films such as *Handsworth Songs* [1986], *The Nine Muses* [2010] and *The Stuart Hall Project* [2012]) at the annual documentary-based conference *Visible Evidence* in Toronto, August 2015, was the utopian promise of the image; with particular emphasis given to the archival image. Akomfrah spoke about the promise of the film archive and the utopian relationship between film, the archive and the future. Not surprisingly, he supported his point with a reference to archival footage. Surprising, however, was the explicit reference made to Claude Lanzmann's widely recognised masterpiece *Shoah* (1985), a film that re-enacts moments of immense trauma for victims of the Holocaust. Akomfrah emphasised the power of *Shoah* in its capacity to affect. Although Akomfrah also used other examples in his address that afternoon, this reference was, nonetheless, somewhat surprising for many audience members, given that Akomfrah's work had been celebrated more for its habitual reworking of the archive in montage (that also draws on multiple film forms), a practice that is marked by the innovative combination of sound

and voiceover. Akomfrah, for many, is a filmmaker who operates on the margins of the documentary spectrum and rarely, if ever, uses processes of re-enactment in his films.

As a member of the audience, I felt somewhat exhilarated during the talk that Akomfrah used this film to illustrate his point. This is based on the premise that there is no actual archive of the Holocaust to draw on: that is, there is no actual documentary footage from the time that present day filmmakers can draw from at will. Akomfrah films, at the level of form, bear little resemblance to *Shoah*. And yet, when reflecting on Akomfrah's proposition that evening, the affinities began to surface. With Lanzmann's direction, it is the survivors who take the form of an archive, while the process of re-enacting the trauma for the camera bears similarity to the formal engagement with the archival image that Akomfrah spoke of. For Lanzmann, the survivors are the archival material, and the film itself is the archive. Turning this relationship a little to the side, we have an *all too* virtual archive, which the poet must make actual. Only when doing so the 'actual' can change into the real accordingly. Or to put it another way, only when the virtual properties of the archive are set upon in montage can the actual be transformed as a political entity. My response to Akomfrah's statement, in the context of all the examples he used, thus rested on the conviction that the duty of the artist is to elicit the promise of the virtual and to make it actual; whether contained in actual memory or the memory contained in images.

Yet, even with the heavily theorised nature of the utopian (as a concept) Akomfrah's remained a somewhat general observation, piquing my interest in the specific filmic context of the utopian as standing for both future and past (at once). This article, therefore, offers a way of understanding this statement in the context of experimental film. I explore it as a theoretical claim, firstly. Then, in what will constitute the article's second aim, I address the practical relationship between archive and promise from the perspective of two films, which Akomfrah directed (as part of collaborative ventures) and which bookend his filmmaking career: *Handsworth Songs* (1986) and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2012). *Handsworth Songs* takes the form of an experimental 'report' on riots that took place in the Handsworth district of Birmingham, the city considered as the home of British Cultural Studies, and one

of Britain's most culturally diverse urban centres. Directed by Akomfrah for the Black Audio Film Collective, which he is a founding member of, the film develops an approach to montage designed to explore the impact of the riots, and the system of their unfolding. *The Stuart Hall Project*, which I turn to in the final section, was made almost thirty years later. It draws almost entirely on archival BBC material to make an experimental report (that is not unlike *Handsworth Songs*), the subject of which is British intellectual Stuart Hall, the founder of British Cultural Studies, and one of the first black British television presenters.

In the analysis that follows, the 'archive' – taken in its vernacular context – is conventionally understood to constitute a historical resource with the purpose of safeguarding time as 'past', and serving as an official record of the past filmically. 'The archive', Michael Zryd notes:

> Is an official institution that separates historical record from the outtake; much of the material used in experimental found footage films is *not* archived but from private collections, commercial stock shot agencies, junk stores, and garbage bins, or has literally been found in the street. (Zryd, 2003: 41; emphasis in original)

The archive, in light of Zryd's analysis, is a record; a kind of prosthetic memory for the masses. In this sense, a nation's archive is a collection of records that is particular to the historicity of a nation state. More recent philosophical writings have focused on the archive as a concept that has a particular genealogy, and that is helpful for engaging with the psychology of memory and memory processes. 'The concept of the archive', Jacques Derrida writes in *Archive Fever* (1996) (a text given over to considering the power invested in archival forms of material memory), 'shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhe*. But it also shelters itself from this memory which it shel- ters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it' (Derrida, 1996: 2). Derrida teases out the genealogy of the word *arkhe* (and *archaeion*) from the original Greek translation as origin and law, when considering law as the power that bestows an official interpre- tation on the archive. It is a leap of sorts to invest the archive with definitive utopian

credentials from this, but Derrida does say that the archive has 'a promise and a responsibility for tomorrow' (Derrida, 1996: 36). However, with stated reference to Derrida and the influence of his writings on the Black Audio Film Collective, for Jean Fisher:

It is hegemonic culture – government and media – that assembles the historical archive, withholds or releases its content and authorises its interpretative discourses. These are subject to ideological manipulation: as BAFC suggest in *Mysteries of July* (1991), people's lives are subject to an 'ongoing political reconstruction', which obliterates transmissible experience. For the diasporic artist to disarticulate this archive is, then, a subversive act insofar as it usurps the power of authority to control meaning. (Fisher, 2007: 25)

Fisher explores the subversive 'disarticulation' of meaning in creative practices, such as those undertaken by Black Audio. Her essay takes the Derridean view of the archive, one of forgetting (as much as remembering), as formative of the approach taken by the Collective. The utopian, which indirectly figures in this account, and indeed in Derrida's approach to the archive, is directed towards the idea of reconstruction, an idea extrapolated on further in the context of Ernst Bloch's writings on time and utopia. Bloch's writing is infused with a certain utopian hope. But although it is rarely discussed in the context of time-based media, his writing is helpful for thinking through the utopian potentiality of a time-based process such as montage.

Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1986) is, thus, a useful resource for theoretically expanding upon Akomfrah's statement, particularly ripe from the significant perspective of time.[1] 'The divisions between future and past thus themselves collapse', Bloch argues in the text, 'unbecome future becomes visible in the past, avenged and

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[1] Although I don't discuss the film in any great length in this article, *The Last Angel of History* is possibly most suited for readings like this, at least on a surface level; especially from the perspective of a 'digitopia', or the inherently utopian possibility around the digital traces of past revolutionary forms. Akomfrah says of a generation of British artists born in and around 1968, 'there is a sense in which the founding regime, the narrative regime that overdetermined every-thing we did, came to us as a set of digital simulacra; as traces of moments forever fixed as virtual references, but always deferred and always already there as a signal, a noise, a kind of utopian possibility. And if you look at most of the films we did, either Black Audio or Smoking Dogs, you get the sense that they are marked by this sense of the utopian as a digital referent' (Akomfrah, 2010a: 27).

inherited, mediated and fulfilled past in the future' (Bloch, 1986: 8–9). Bloch feels it is important that whatever form time takes, it has the immanent potential to 'unbecome'. Although thinking of time as a continuum of stages (each of which inheres in the other), the utopian 'not yet' is believed to be the potentiality immanent to the form time takes. An image, or a series of images, is one possible form he alludes to. In response, we can conclude that an image of the past 'unbecomes' when it is combined with other images (and new sound) in time creatively. Bloch is slow to specify art forms in his writings, but for Susan McManus, 'Bloch's understanding of time as possibility reconfigures the world itself' around creative means. She goes on to suggest:

> (And) it is not enough to change how we think about the world: we must also change everything about the way we think… Knowledge of the world can no longer be fallaciously conceived via various epistemologies of the "given", and becomes, instead, a creative epistemology of the possible. (McManus, 2003: 2)

For McManus, Bloch's approach hinges on understanding the given and the possible, particularly in relation to the formulation of an epistemology. This is particularly relevant to the Black Audio Film Collective's attempt to address the given means of representation; in addition to the possible forms representation can take. Taking images in their capacity to unbecome, the Collective is really exploring the relationship between the image and its 'reconstruction' in montage as it pertains to time. The utopian is the 'not yet' coming out of an imaginative engagement with an already existing epistemology. And when invested in creatively, the archive comes not to stand for a particular time 'past', but a rupture that is immanent to the utopian. 'The utopian spaces of rupture', McManus notes:

> Within the present and the given–alterity and critique–generate prefiguration and fuel transformation of the given–without, however, closing the spaces of alterity and critique. These four elements, then, can be seen as two utopian moments: the disruptive and the institutional. Both are epistemologically and politically necessary, and dialectically related. The second

moment, of institutionalisation must itself always be subject to the disruptive and imaginative moment. (McManus, 2003: 3)

The utopian, in this sense, is disruptive. Its creative (and indeed) and fictive effectiveness is premised on a surplus immanent to time itself. The dialectic tension between an 'institution' and its 'disruption', as identified by McManus, resonates with a view of the archive as an epistemology of the given – sometimes institutional in form – withholding potential to disrupt from within, by way of a promise. McManus cites Louis Marin's reading of utopian practice to support her point:

Utopian practice establishes itself in the distance between reality and its other: it traverses this discontinuity which is that of transgression itself, by producing the term which neither reduces nor annuls the discontinuity as do a social ideal or a political project, but which dissimulates and reveals the discontinuity: the utopian figure. (Marin qtd in McManus, 2003: 6)

An emphasis to creative 'disruptive' energy is given here, bringing forms out of what they are, creating discontinuities from this. McManus is interested in the utopian moment in all political projects as such. Bringing a surplus to heel as a project or an idea involves celebrating the utopian figure as 'this' or 'that', while paradoxically aligning the transgressive with the law. However, the utopian promise can be said to activate a surplus that cannot be contained. One aim of this article is to consider the archive's potential for such disruption, based on the creative possibilities its rendering as a record of past time seems to preclude. Considered solely as a record, we forget the archive's promise. Bloch, however, pushes against such normative views to consider utopian practice as temporally aligned to future and past. The future is not precluded from past form but, rather, inheres in it. 'The guiding potential of the future is always present in Bloch's work', McManus says of Bloch's writing on time, 'understood as that potential which confronts, opens up, and disrupts, the acceptance of given realities as the only realities' (McManus, 2003: 7). As a result, the archive's disruptive potential is repressed when it is considered a temporal *this* or *that.*

A Poet (in and) of the Archive

Handsworth Songs is an interesting reference point in this regard, particularly as it brings footage from so many different 'time' periods together. Archived images of first generation migrants arriving on the British shores are counterpointed with those of the next generation rioting on the streets of Birmingham; and this montage is embellished by audio that gives the viewing an affective resonance. The montage impresses the viewer in its uncanny relevance to the present moment, in which race riots of a similar nature have broken out across the UK and Europe. As if the film was made in the last decade, Mark Fisher celebrates this millenarian-like echo of a future (Fisher, 2014: 223). This peculiar relevance to the present is testament to the film's power to affect; a consequence of the way it engages the archive material. *The Last Angel of History* (1996), by contrast, is an essay film, which is concerned with future time and the present in a more literal sense. It draws on the angel of history, which Walter Benjamin writes of in the early twentieth century as a trope for exploring black artists' concerns with a time yet to come, and works with ideas of the future more specifically.[2] By the time of *The Stuart Hall Project*, Akomfrah had become a well-established filmmaker, celebrated for drawing on the archive as part of a broader rethinking of British identity. He finds a like-minded soul in Hall, as is explored in the final section of this article. *The Stuart Hall Project* is a 'project' that channels the poetic affect not just in its combination of BBC material with a Jazz score, but also the setting of different historical periods in audio-visual montages of time: a kind of remix.

The 'poetic' tallies with Bill Nichols' instantiation of the poetic documentary as one of six modes of documentary in *Introduction to Documentary* (1991), which for many is the go-to-text within documentary film studies. Nichols finds the origins of the 'poetic mode' in European avant-gardist cinema, and particularly with

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[2] Laura Marks's essay 'Monad, Database, Remix: Manners of Unfolding in *The Last Angel of History*' is a good reference point in this regard, addressing the role of 'remix' in audio-visual montage in relation to futurity as such. Marks notes that 'from a majoritarian point of view, the idea of remixing history sounds capricious and irresponsible; but not so for Afrofuturists. The remix manner of unfolding takes a point of view from the underside of majoritarian history and perceives the power of the remix to release energy to hitherto unimagined connections' (Marks, 2015: 129).

filmmakers such as Joris Ivens and Dizga Vertov. He argues that these are film-makers who pioneered the use of affective-impressionistic tropes for specific rhe-torical and sensory ends. The poetic is a mode of documentary that involves the creative treatment of historical footage when – as Nichols states – manipulated rhythmically and tonally. For Nichols, the imparting of information in conventional documentary production, i.e. the parsing of rhetorical means of persuasion with journalistic investigation (or exposition), is of lesser importance than the tonal and rhythmic manipulation of images for sensory and aesthetic ends; when tone and rhythm take precedence over 'factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion' (Nichols, 1991: 162). Archival images, as outlined earlier, fit Nichols's idea of his-torical documents to be reshaped for poetic and artistic ends (in montage). The archive is, foremost, a record of conventional documentary-based reportage about the 'given', such as the news and, as Akomfrah demonstrates in *The Stuart Hall Project*, it has the capacity to be used for ends that are more specifically understood as 'poetic'.

These distinctions are important, not least because the Akomfrah films dis-cussed here are archival-based, but also because the rhythm and tone of montage are features present in texts produced from the beginning of the Black Audio Film Collective's output, as well as seen in more recent works produced by Smoking Dogs Films (the production collective Akomfrah formed with other members of Black Audio Film Collective [BAFC]). *Handsworth Songs* makes reference to audio or sound culture in its title, and the film itself can be said to inculcate the rhythms and tones of migrant music, reggae, ska, or the beat-based ethnic rhythms particu-lar to the community of Handsworth addressed in the film, translating the 'songs' of these communities into 'poetic' visual form. *Handsworth Songs* invests the audio with a cadence of tone and rhythm, and among many other things, tries to undo the hegemony of visual over audio form. The culture of 'borrowed beats', sampling and appropriated sounds, associated with the contemporary youth cultures of London and New York, mirrors the turn to appropriation and re-contextualisation in other artistic forms. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this undoubtedly played a part in the aesthetic decision to sample archival footage taken from news outlets

and television stations (from the BBC to Yorkshire Television and Birmingham Central Library).

We can see this 'poetic' remix approach in the sequence dedicated to the funeral of Cynthia Jarrett (who died suddenly and tragically when the police entered her London home during the riots. Jarrett was an innocent victim of the riots). The sequence cuts from an archival image of a black factory worker, speaking about the city of Birmingham, to the much-televised funeral hearse travelling through the city. An ambient score designed to play over the imagery of the funeral proceedings morphs into a rhythm, married to a traditional 'Funeral Song' and minimalist industrial-techno sounds. Splicing 'noise' and melody (with the older archival image intercut with archived images of the recent past) together is part of the film's concern to reconfigure dominant media images of time in remix form. The image of Jarrett's funeral is reclaimed from media outlets that offer only one context, just as the rhythm and cadence of 'sound' offer multiple contexts and intensities.

With the advent of contemporary visual and sonic art practices, remix studies has become an important part of the academic debate today (even if it yet has to impact on documentary studies). In *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* (2015), Martin Irvine refers to the legacy of Miles Davis as a precedent for much of the improvisatory methods that are found in the remix culture that has emerged from the eighties onwards. Irvine's analysis of improvised Jazz offers a model for engaging with the rhythm and cadence of audio-visual montage in *Handsworth Songs*. 'In each bar of the recorded performances', Irvine writes, 'we can hear the results of the generative-recursive processes used to combine rhythms, tones, phrases, harmonization, and styles from a common vocabulary selected for contextually specific functions' (Irvine, 2015: 15). Irvine goes on to compare the set composition in the context of the tonal and rhythmic arrangements of Jazz, and the improvised, stating that:

> In improvisation, the Janus-like generative combinatorial structure provides the spaces for *quotations from the future*, the about-to-be, but not-yet-said, in dialog with the live conversation of performance and the larger traditions internalized by musicians. The symbolic form, activated in real-time, enables structured

anticipations: projected *future* expressions as possibilities in the form are already
in *memory* in the present moment. (Irvine, 2015: 28; emphasis in original)

In the tone and rhythm of improvised Jazz, Irvine identifies a certain Blochian tem-
porality, and a theoretical template that is useful for considering the relationship
between tradition and its '*future* expressions' in film form. Just as we are able to dif-
ferentiate between recorded, non-improvised Jazz and an improvised form, it is also
possible for a documentary to use the archive in such a way that it is distinguishable
from a poetic intervention into the archive; when the latter is defined by a distilla-
tion of improvised assemblages of sound and image. Following Irvine, one needs to
understand the 'common vocabulary' that makes up the form itself in order for the
'*future* anticipations' of poetic 'time' to emerge through improvised assemblages.
This is also a way of saying that the common vocabulary of audio-visual montage
needs to be understood first, before new structures can emerge. A new grammar in
tonal, rhythmic and spatial arrangements can only emerge, Irvine notes, when the
form as it is generally rendered, as it is understood traditionally, is internalised by
the artist first.

Numerous examples of this internalisation and resistance are played out in
Handsworth Songs. One such sequence is captivating in this sense, in that it remixes
television material and interviews with images of other art forms. The camera cuts
from an archival interview with Thatcher talking about the essential 'character' of
Britishness, the fear that new minority cultures threaten this character, to a slowed
down image of a black Rasta being chased by the riot police. As an ambient sound-
scape plays over, the camera cuts again to representatives of the Asian community,
speaking about class as a key ingredient for the unfolding tension. We then see a
large-scale mural painting that appears to narrate the riots in painterly form, as the
ambient soundscape can be heard once more and the camera cuts again to street
marches. On first impression, the sequence is notable for its lack of a voiceover and
the way in which its soundscape and montage are designed to affect viewers. But it is
also notable for the way these archived images are combined so as to converse with
older systems of representation. The montage encourages us to see the overt racism

of Thatcher's speech, given in a television interview, as linked to the stereotypes found in the mural. The montage is as much about conversing with a past defined by stereotyped images of race, as it is about developing a type of filmmaking that forges the platform for 'future expressions' of time to emerge.

Salman Rushdie, somewhat famously, criticised *Handsworth Songs* for actually perpetuating stereotypes. He believes that the film failed to tell the riot stories, and questions the refrain 'there are no stories in the riots' used throughout. Rushdie notes: 'the sad thing is that while the film-makers are trying to excavate ruptures and work out how trajectories can colour fields, they let us hear so little of the much richer language of their subjects' (Rushdie, 1987: n. pag.). He goes on to say:

> It isn't easy for black voices to be heard, it isn't easy to get it said that the state attacks us, that the police are militarised. It isn't easy to fight back against media stereotypes. As a result, whenever somebody says what we all know, even if they say it clumsily and in jargon, there's a strong desire to cheer, just because they managed to get something said, they managed to get through. (Rushdie, 1987: n. pag.)

For Rushdie, the film's formalism (which I argue is designed to etch out a grammar for a new black British Identity, whose secondary aim is to address the hegemony of certain media forms) clouds out the narrative voices, and hence the rich language of those who witnessed the riots. In this sense, Rushdie's criticism cuts right into the discourse surrounding documentary forms, particularly when experimentation is given precedence over a common vocabulary that everyone supposedly understands. This discursive debate tends to pit those for whom a framework for the documentary mediation of stories serves as a 'common vocabulary' – call it 'reportage' – against those for whom it is necessary to build a grammar of the future that could allow for new political reference points. Even if it involves blocking out diegetic sound in favour of an abstract ambient soundtrack, this latter approach may well have irritated a curious Rushdie, who expressed his concern for the lack of context given to the subjects of the Handsworth district. His criticism, however, is of a media product

he believes does little to alter the stereotypes assigned to the community, which the film addresses.

Rushdie's criticism contrasts with those whom Akomfrah would turn to as a subject of the two films discussed in the conclusion to this article, such as Stuart Hall, and those who celebrate *Handsworth Songs* as a coming-into-being of a grammar for which the standards of reportage do not and cannot apply. It's not just about telling stories with a 'common vocabulary', but about experimenting so that a grammar emerges from the already existing language. Evolving a grammar for the representation of 'new' British subjectivities, as opposed to one essential British 'character', means rupturing the prescient and perhaps dominant lexicon of the given in sound and image in a poetic capacity. Rushdie believes the Black Audio Film Collective to have failed in reporting the stories of Handsworth. Hall nonetheless argues:

> I fully agree that there is no one "black experience", and we need to confront its real diversity without forcing it into simplistic moulds. But subjects and experience don't appear out of thin air. The counterposing of "experience" to "politics" is a false and dangerous dichotomy. Black Audio may have been guilty of mixing its metaphors when it spoke of "a political field coloured by trajectories of industrial decline and structural crisis". But it seems to be struggling harder for a language in which to represent Handsworth as I know it than Salman's lofty, disdainful, and too-complacent "Oh dear". (Hall, 1987: n. pag.)

The deficit between experience and political forms, and the experimental use of film and audio to augment this deficit structurally in an-at-once new grammar is, arguably, where the 'poetics' of *Handsworth Songs* is most firmly felt. This is why Hall can say that experience doesn't always counterpoise with politics, and the image doesn't always stand in for something that is indexical to it. Nonetheless, it is not simply a matter of taking sides in the debate between Rushdie and Hall. Rushdie's response provides some indication of what makes a film a documentary in his eyes. For

Rushdie, the Collective's aesthetic obscures the voices of the film's subjects, which he adjudges to be one of its flaws.

 Nonetheless, *Handsworth Songs* draws on accounts of life after the riots in Handsworth to offer first-hand responses to the lack of government intervention in the lives of young people in the district, side-by-side with the more experimental moments. Akomfrah also speaks about the Collective's interest in exploring what he called the 'surplus under class', i.e. the new British working class that was made up of second generation migrant families, (the 'Windrush Generation' of Caribbean, Indian Sub-Continent and African migrants)[3] when the riots began to take shape in Birmingham. The decision to travel to Birmingham to film the riots (and their aftermath) as they unfolded, while undertaking this same project, was political as well as poetic in intent: 'who was to blame'? So, the project that came to materialise as *Handsworth Songs* began as a report on the riots, but grew into a multi-faceted poetic film, deviating from, and drawing on, already established modes of documentary film. Although in its use of sound and montage it experiments with formal strategies, there is a clear engagement with the tradition of British documentary in the way voiceover is used, for the integration of interviews, so as to illustrate the manner in which tradition is internalised while at the same time resisted.

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[3] In an interview with Stoffel Debuysere from the online publication *Sabzian*, Akomfrah states: 'now, you've got to remember that the 1981 disturbances in the streets of London and across the country were being re-enacted by people of my age and that's not too surprising because we were almost certainly the first post-migrant generation. Think about the demographic shifts that took place in England between 1949 and '59: about 1.5 million people came across from Africa, the Caribbean, the West Indies,… It takes about four or five years to find your feet, so if you start to have kids in the beginning of the 1960s, they turn 18 in 1981, give or take a few years. That demographic block which comes of age between 1976 and '85, those who are the offspring of the original migrant settlers, are historically unusual because for the first time a culture has to find a way of processing them. But they are also historically unusual because in a very real sense they spell the coming of the "hyphen". In other words these are people who will be uniquely hybrid, but not in the way that is nowadays fashionably spoken about. They are black British, yes, but their identities will be formed in that space between the two. Because both categories exist prior to them' (Debuysere, 2014: n. pag.).

Back to a Future

Christopher Pavsek's *The Utopia of Film: Cinema and its Futures in Godard, Kluge and Tamihik* (2013) is one of a selected number of texts that explores cinema as utopian, while giving a certain emphasis to nonfiction or documentary. Pavsek calls cinema a 'talisman of a different time from the past and a cipher of a different future… a bearer of unfulfilled promises and possibilities that arose in history and [it] calls for their future realization'. Cinema, he argues, is both 'retrospective mythical construct' and an 'actually existing form or medium', which 'embodies a utopian wish' (Pavsek, 2013: 3). Akomfrah finds a promise where Pavsek finds a wish, but like Pavsek, his concern is cinema as a myth-making medium. Far from such a status being gained because of formal experimentation alone, *Handsworth Songs*, along with many of the films Akomfrah has directed since, has been celebrated for its innovation in content as much as form. On the utopianism involved in such practices (considered as collective attempts to counteract dominant cinema), Akomfrah states:

> All three debates I have described were unashamedly utopian. Each in its own unique way would try to overcome what it perceived as the limits/limitations of what we used to call "dominant cinema" either by privileging and foregrounding new forms through which "cinema" could be realized, or by attempting to reformulate new rules by which our belonging to it could be secured. To the extent that all three were structured by these utopian yearnings, I would now prefer to also see them as "digitopic" residues, "post-analogic". (Akomfrah, 2010a: 24)

Akomfrah recognises the utopian strands in his practice (oppositional to modes of mainstream cinema) and the aim to reformulate the rules of the given, so as to open up new forms of representation. In this way, the cinema is a vehicle for 'utopian yearnings', premised on activating an epistemology of the possible, a future – *qua* Bloch – that is already a residue of the past. Indeed, *The Stuart Hall Project* can be considered as employing a Blochian approach to the image, a process of 'unbecoming' that remixes the content of the archive to engage time in a strictly Blochian sense.

Akomfrah completed two projects on Stuart Hall, founder of British Cultural Studies and esteemed public intellectual, before Hall's death in 2014. Hall and Akomfrah both came to the UK at a relatively young age, and both are intellectuals with a focused interest on the migrant condition. Akomfrah talks about growing up watching current affairs programs on the BBC, struck by Hall as one of the few black figures on television at the time. Hall is also one of the first black British intellectuals to have had a pervasive media presence, and is significant in his status as both a public intellectual of some regard as well as a theorist, whose influence has filtered into all areas of the humanities.

'The flowering of British cultural studies [was] bolstered by the analytical rigour of Stuart Hall', as Okwui Enwezor notes:

> The rediscovery of the works of the likes of C.L.R James, the emergence of thinkers such as Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer, the launch of Third Text by Rasheed Araeen, and the emergence of Southall Black Sisters among a host of other groups gives an indication of the artistic and intellectual climate under which *Black Audio Film Collective* were founded and within which it operated. (Enwezor, 2007: 118)

For Enwezor, the aforementioned figures come out of 'transnational post-colonialism', the condition that British subjects who had migrated from the former British colonies, like Hall and Akomfrah, found themselves in. Hall, who hailed originally from Jamaica, is integral to the formalisation of post-colonial theory and was, as stated in interviews, an ever-present influence on the young migrant Akomfrah (for whose cinematic project the issue of identity would become central). It can thus be said, *pace* Pavsek, that Akomfrah's turn to Stuart Hall has something mythical about it, continuing a concern with the archive and the temporality of cinema as a medium.

The Stuart Hall Project is a feature-length film that was produced in collaboration with the BBC, and was preceded by a three-screen, three-track, multi-media installation that draws on the same archival footage, designed for a gallery setting called *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) (the latter taking its title from Hall's theorisation of

identity formation in the latter stages of the feature film). *The Unfinished Conversation* is influenced by Hall's take on 'identity' as a conversation in a constant state of flux or becoming, and focuses on his life up until the year 1968. *The Stuart Hall Project*, by contrast, is a relatively unorthodox feature-length documentary, given its title as a 'project' (and Akomfrah's theoretical pronouncements on archival intervention), which ends in the present of 2012. Although the film has been the recipient of numerous awards, Akomfrah, as Rajinder Dudrad notes: 'Uses a paradoxical and reflexive practice in order to place Hall in a central position, while also being mindful about the ways that Hall's own thinking encourages us to adopt a critical position in relation to claims of sociocultural centrality' (Dudrad, 2015: 384). The soundtrack is made up of Miles Davis's music, and the film ebbs and flows with a rhythm, giving an improvisational feel to the journey through Hall's life. Miles Davis's extensive back catalogue brings filmmaker and film subject into a kind of shared realm of appreciation as Jazz fans.[4]

Like *Handsworth Songs*, *The Stuart Hall Project* can be said to channel an energy Fred Moten finds in improvisation, 'that exceeds the structure of their oscillation between happiness and despair, resurrection and mourning' (Moten, 2003: 198). Moten's idea of excess is relevant in that *The Stuart Hall Project* is also a film about home and homelessness, exploring both in the context of past and future. However, *The Stuart Hall Project* is also a kind of remix of archived media: 'with each moment', as Mark Fisher notes, 'each crystal of televisual space-time, functioning like a sample' (Fisher, 2013: 3). The film differs from *Handsworth Songs* in that the near total footage is sourced from one archive. In this sense, it is a rarefication of Akomfrah's remix aesthetic, knitting archival documentary footage together (whether in the form of first person interviews or spatially montaged

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[4] Fred Moten has made the implicit association between improvisation, freedom and homelessness within the black radical tradition in his writing on Jazz. When interviewed in the aftermath of the Ferguson riots in 2014, he made the point that improvisation is linked to the responsibility incumbent upon us, with homelessness a certain type of freedom. It is interesting to consider Moten's ideas in the context of the archive as an origin, and the remix as a way of defining one's essential homelessness with regard to this origin (Moten, 2015: n. pag.).

still photographs) into sequences, which are held together by prominent ideas as opposed to time periods. Akomfrah employs somewhat of an unorthodox approach to time, revealing the Blochian temporality of the image through the cadence of audio-visual montage. Hall's life is presented under the rubric of the Idea, with each Idea taking the form of episodes spanning Hall's encounters with the post-colonial to his involvement with the New Left. The film also addresses his discovery of feminism, difficulties with Thatcherism and the universalisation of neoliberalism as a global force. Each Idea is introduced by an intertitle, accompanied by a Miles Davis composition. The film ends with the focus on an ageing Hall, in such a way as to bring the logic of 'time' that Akomfrah plays with throughout the film into full effect. Akomfrah ends with footage of Hall's appearance on a *Newsnight* debate about the Kosovan refugee crisis following a NATO bombing of the region. Facing the accusation that Europe will be flooded with refugees fleeing the crisis, Hall calmly states 'they may not have a genuine case', before noting: 'but I don't know how on earth you could describe the people by simply looking at them… by looking in the faces, as bogus'. Before a reply is given, a split screen close-up follows, as Hall in voiceover references his estrangement from the present. Hall's face is presented twice on a divided frame, splitting the cinematic screen into two halves.[5] This is a particularly affecting moment in the film: folding back institutional power in the form of the BBC, so that the face of Hall, himself a migrant subject, confronts an audience asked to consider the migrant condition per se. The combination of sound and image in Mathison's haunting score is also effective in underscoring the double portrait that now hangs like a painting, perhaps used to remind us we are viewing an image while at the same time emphasising the Blochian capacity of art to reconfigure time.

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[5] Emmanuelle Levinas's writings on the face as the origin of the ethical is pertinent here. 'The face, still a thing among things', Levinas notes, 'breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge' (Levinas, 1991: 198).

The Time for Promises

On the left, Hall is looking down, unable to meet the gaze of the camera, while on the right he is looking outwards with contrasting optimism. The split between intellect and will, pessimism and optimism, unifies in the shot that follows as the camera zooms in on Hall's eyes before shifting outwards again to a series of photographs, sourced, at least it appears so, from private moments in Hall's life. In this latter sense, Hall appears to be speaking from beyond the grave. Although the debate is about Kosovo, it could very easily be addressing the contemporary political and humanitarian crisis in post-2011 Syria, such is the universality of the moment as it reaches into our present time. It is a moment when the 'project' in the film's title is affective in suggesting this isn't just an autobiographical film about the 'past', but a study of the image's relevance to the present as a shared gesture. When Hall speaks about living 'out of time', the moment is a kind of testimony to a conversation with time itself; illustrating the archive's potential to 'unbecome' according to what Bloch calls a utopian practice. At the precise moment we remember Hall's impassioned speech, we are tempted to forget it as a point of origin; drawing our attention to the relevance of what is being said about the current constellation of crises. Given the uncertainty Hall has for the present on which he comments, this is just one reason why the film ends not in pessimism, but with daring hope.

Just as *Handsworth Songs* brings separate temporalities into play to converse with a present that is also the film's future, a sense of time rupturing is felt at this point of *The Stuart Hall Project*; brought about by Mathison's score and the starry 'cosmos', which is used as the background to remix the BBC archive of Hall speaking: making sound and image collide in a way that is ultimately new. The full poetic effect of the moment is felt in making a future trace evident in what is constituted as 'past'. We are reminded of the image's potential to 'unbecome' at the precise point that we experience time, not as a set of stages, each of which are linked together, but as a series of possibilities.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I set out to explore a statement about the archive's promise and the utopian potential contained in images, made one sunny afternoon in Toronto. We are now in a position to offer some sense of what this means. We can now identify the archive that Akomfrah speaks of in its capacity to 'unbecome' in montage that is utopian precisely because 'unbecoming' is constitutive of a creative reimagining that is open to everyone: the future is ours. This involves an intervention described as Blochian in this article, in that it reawakens our sense of an origin at the precise point at which that same origin is reconstructed. We come to realise that the archive is not just our shared past, but also our shared future. However much we are told otherwise, such an intervention is also political, precisely because it disrupts the given reality of the image in its evident temporality, making it all the more apparent that the time *of* the image is both a given and a made possible. If there is a utopian promise in this process, it is indeed the promise of time itself.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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