

Peggy Ahwesh, Steve McQueen and Russell T Davis: reflections on the 1980s under lockdown

Article

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Garfield, R. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4747-4150>
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There seems to be a lot about the 1970s and 1980s at the moment, not least of which my book. In lockdown as I finished my 5 year project, on women experimental film makers from the 1970s and 1980s, I have been focussing on this past time that formed me. Watching films by artist/film makers that I love has helped to keep my anger at the present at bay. A parallel journey back in time has been playing out on TV via the high-profile voices of Steve McQueen and Russell T Davis. Steve McQueen’s series, *Small Axe* pays tribute to the black communities’ struggles, as the post war era waned and the aggressively Neo-liberal individualist world waxed. The anger and activism from an earlier period presciently planned for a 2020 screening speaks out at us from the TV, coinciding with Black Lives Matter, and begs the question of how exactly have things improved in the last forty years? By contrast Russell T Davis’ *It’s a Sin*, is a more sugar-coated dramatisation of the 1980s in its treatment of the trauma of the AIDs generation and the impact of the disease on a small group of young gay men and allies in London. How do these different voices meet, mix and coalesce as both a vision from that era and memory of that era?

I loved *Small Axe*. The power of the dramatization of the Mangrove 9 was rousing and eloquent. However, it also behoves us to remember and take note of *Lovers Rock* (BBC: 2020) which told the story not only of post-colonial self-empowerment against the appalling racisms but emphasised the moments of pleasure and normality of young people ‘getting it on’ and creating a pleasurable bulwark against a hostile world. The audiences were divided (on facebook at least – it seemed to split opinion the most of all the series), some requiring fidelity to their own memory, under the guise of authenticity. Others wanted more convention followed. I felt it captured a necessary moment of somatic joy, nestled within some hard-hitting films about the struggles of that generation to establish their rights as British citizens and a distinctive voice as British people of colour. McQueen’s memory, as a boy presumably watching the grown-ups being grown up at a Blues party is as valid as the authority of older Paul Gilroy, an advisor to the series. Davis’ series also fell prey to the same need of some to coincide with their own

conclusive memory - it reminds us that no community speaks as one; that history is a contested space and not a definitive one; that sometimes to live a life is the most resistance you can muster. To be politically active is transformative but there is also opposition and struggle in embodying values in life as lived. These films are not documentary but dramatisations, so a way of telling the story of a memory that is becoming historical time. Walter Benjamin in the *Storyteller* reminds us of the importance of narrativization. He pits the experiential and interpretative value of storytelling through repetition and assimilation against the verifiability of information, such as journalism. Benjamin argues that a story “does not expend itself” unlike information. Information, he states, is ephemeral and overrun by the next latest news bulletin. The value of storytelling is ongoing, and he likens the storyteller to teachers and sages (Benjamin 1999, 83-107). In its iterative nature, storytelling is mutable which is what offers an interpretive power. Thus, to draw out some more common threads, the instability of the narrative, as offered by Benjamin, opens up productive possibilities for understanding one’s place in the world that the certainties of knowledge do not. Histories of marginalised communities are particularly incomplete and require more stories and more different stories - not less.

Remembering the racisms (and the anti-Semitism I experienced) from the 1970s and 1980s, the particular forms it took in my youth, the kickbacks akin (for its own time) to BLM were also there from allies and brought to wider attention through activism such as Rock against Racism as a key example. In art there were films that gave a voice to what was then an optimistic multicultural normativity such as Anne Robinson’s *Real Woman* (1985) which was a sort of home-made music promo for the anarcho-punk band, The Poison Girls, featuring a bunch of women on a day out to the seaside. The camaraderie and joy of these women is palpable in the film, their colour differences rendered irrelevant in the moment. The slightly later films of Vivienne Dick’s *London Suite* (1990) and Ruth Novaczek’s *Rootless Cosmopolitans* (1990) both actively address commonalities between the people who are often in other spheres, differenced. I crave more approaches that give a vision of what Kobena Mercer called widening the chain of equivalences (Mercer, 1994:296). At a time of what seems to be increasing

differences, claims of authenticity and the ethnic insiderism of who is not allowed to speak for whom, I want more approaches that draw us together in shared experiences and shared struggles that we may experience as humans as some of these earlier examples of Robinson, Dick and Novaczek do. Not to replace collective political activism but as well as. Recognising the dynamism in looking for possibilities in an imperfect world, loving the mistakes, getting it wrong, of trying - in circumstances not of your own making - seems to me to be the gift of films that speak to me. It is a matter of a range of different voices. I've been thinking about voices and about who speaks how and for whom, and when.

I find myself fascinated by the way in which people speak in Peggy Ahwesh's early films. I'm partly thinking about her films during the various lockdowns, because they could have been made under lockdown. They are made with no budget (Ha Ha! Peggy responded to my email asking her if *Pittsburgh Trilogy Part 1& 2* was funded) produced with a small group of people doing what they do. This early film of Ahwesh was at the opposite end of the scale to McQueen or Davis, not made for a mass TV audience. Clearly influenced by Warhol – as she readily acknowledges (Macdonald, 2006:115) – but unlike the faux New York drug fueled grunge at the Chelsea Hotel, with an image to foster, the Ahwesh crew are living in their low rent homes, filming the weekly chess game, drinking tea. Ahwesh is not making these films to tell a specific story as you might with the hindsight that affords McQueen and Davis, who are making communities visible to popular history through media representation. Ahwesh states that people would ring her up for years asking her to film them telling their story – making themselves visible to someone (ibid). And while it is not a documentary that provides information, nor a dramatization that tells a story – it is a little bit of both and in the both, or in between lies its power and fascination.

'The films—what are they *about*? I don't know. They're not diary films, and they're not documentaries, and they're not narratives. "Portraits" seems inadequate, actually, though that's the word I usually use. It was more like me doing conceptual exercises so that I could figure out what kind of relationship I had with the person, and what kind of relationship the

camera had with the person, and how do you shoot positive and negative space, and what is it about people that makes them interesting? To me these three people were amazing examples of humanity, and I really liked them' (Macdonald 2006:119).

Pittsburgh trilogy Part 1 & 2 opens in a living room. It is shot on a hand-held super 8 camera. This first section is titled *Verite Opera*. The opening shot is of Claudelle wearing the flared jeans and capped T shirt popular at the time, tall and muscular. Hall and Oates "I Can't Go For That" is playing on a record player. On noticing she is being filmed, she looks straight through the screen, eyes lighting up, captivating me as she preens and twirls in front of the camera with an enchanting smile on her face, before taking a drink of some pop and resuming her cleaning. She proceeds to sweep the carpet. She is one of those people who hold the camera with such finesse that you cannot take your eyes off them. Claudelle Bazemore 'was a black transvestite, whose boyfriend was in prison' (ibid:118). In today's nomenclature I am thinking that she would consider herself genderqueer but sadly she is not alive to ask. I feel a lingering sadness and anxiety about her early death and wonder at the reasons for it. I keep going back again to look at her vivacity in the film and compare it to the acting in *It's a Sin*. Left to my imagination, this unknown cause of death is so much more piercing. She was so alive in the film that I didn't need what the narrative films rely on, the back story, nor the trajectory of her life to be touched by her.

Then a man with a raincoat is in the frame, shot from behind, sitting on one of the arms of a chair. He is white, slightly chubby and has a beard and glasses. Later we see that he wears a striped shirt and golf check trousers. This is Roger Schwab. The film then cuts to Roger coming back into the room. The wooden door is chipped and it looks like part of the wooden frame has been hacked at. The furniture is second hand and cobbled together. One arm-chair is missing part of its wooden arm. Roger puts The Rolling Stones' "Daddy You're a Fool" on the turntable, while Claudelle continues to clean.

The passage of time throughout the film is marked through the records playing in the background. There is no continuity as fragments of the different records come back and forth through a series of jump cuts, while Claudelle continues to clean. This choppy editing of sound gives a sense of time passing and a build-up of expectation around the pastime to come. The two people move around each other, obviously attuned to each other in this space. After five minutes of cleaning Claudelle brings out the chess board: Claudelle and Roger meet every week to play chess. The two of them occasionally smile or wave at Awshesh with the camera and there is no invisibility of the process here. On the contrary it is important to the overall approach of self-representation. Claudelle dresses up to play, appearing in a lavender jump suit, pearls and black head wrap, putting on the last touches of lipstick and a black cape. In the next scene, both of them sitting by the chess board, Claudelle is looking through drawings. "To excite the eye and amuse the imagination.....These are pictures we are going to discuss during our game of chess" she states. These are drawings of ancient Egyptian paintings and a clear source of cultural pride as she tells the viewer what they are looking at. Again the editing jumps in time back and forth between the game and the pictures. Just as we begin to understand the cinematic language and enjoy the pace, the camera jumps to two different scenes in quick succession, an older black woman talking, standing next to long net curtains, wearing a red jumper, then Roger, entering a dining room full of people, making his way to the table. Adding texture, there is no specific visual logic nor explanation to these shots.

Part two, *Para Normal Intelligence*, is filmed in another apartment, somewhere else, and in addition to Claudelle and Roger, Margie Strosser, a third person, adds to the group. She introduces herself by way of shouting at the camera over the Ramones playing on the turntable, and at Peggy holding the camera. They argue about production, about methodologies of filming, a slacker approach of drifting around versus a planned schedule of filming: a meta narrative that adds some conceptual texture to the work. She's fed up but ends up laughing self-consciously. 'Talk to me!, talk into your mic and answer me...This is a dialogue, even though I'm the only one in the fucking frame'. Awshesh uses this device in other films - of women, shouting over the music at the camera, and therefore at us the viewer - a metaphor for

the struggle to be heard and possibly the only way a woman could shout (thank you Jenny C for that last insight).

While watching this film over the summer I have *Small Axe* playing in my head. I'm struck by the differences, not only of budget and audience but of the expectations: one to explain and convince the other to ...what? It is not portentous and does not aim to teach, as Tom Gunning remarked of Ahwesh and others from the 1980s, "These films assert no vision of conquest, make no claims to hegemony." (Gunning, quoted in MacDonald 2006:111) What is at stake in this for me could be found in Benjamin's *The Storyteller* "The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work.....is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again".

These are different approaches to making yourself heard. *Small Axe*, *It's a Sin* and *Pittsburgh Trilogy* are all to do with speaking out and I love them all in their different ways. But in the end it is the open ended presentation of subjectivity that empowers me, that doesn't fix the characters in their specific histories. To watch a film about lives in the making, without any discernible narrative arc, that revels in its marginality, is to experience a glitchy and unselfconscious life that is not directed but merely implied. The catharsis of the former films are moving but leave no room for further action. Instead, *Pittsburgh Trilogy* closes the barriers of difference by embedding those differences in an everyday struggle to live that we all share as humans.

Alone and together, "female", "queer", "black" as a survival strategy demand the creation of their individual machinery, that innovates, builds, resists. With physical movement often restricted female-identifying people, queer people Black people invent ways to create space through rupture' (Russell, 2020: 7)

