

‘HOW CAN YOU MEND A BROKEN HEART?’: STEVE MCQUEEN’S SMALL AXE AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LEADERSHIP

Dhanveer Singh Brar and Ashwani Sharma

Abstract: In this article we undertake a reading of Steve McQueen’s *Small Axe*, a collection of five films produced for the BBC and Amazon in 2020. Focused on a series of events and figures central to the making of modern Black British consciousness over the 1970s and 1980s, we suggest that *Small Axe* is preoccupied by a set of narrative questions concerning leadership, authority and individuation, combined with an aesthetics of suspension, the interval and the look. Speaking to the contemporary moment in Black Britain, as much as a sense of historical verisimilitude, we frame our reading of *Small Axe* through the rebellions which followed the police shooting to death of Mark Duggan on 4 August 2011.

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INTRODUCTION

One line of argument in our 2019 article ‘What is this “Black” in Black Studies? From Black British Cultural Studies to Black Critical Thought in UK Arts and Higher Education’, concerned a feature we chose to identify as the ‘afterlife of Black British Cultural Studies’.¹ The proposition went as follows: the project initiated by Stuart Hall and the Race and Politics Group at the University of Birmingham was given its charge through an intimacy with both the Black British arts movement of the 1980s and everyday Black diasporic sonic culture. Due to a combination of internal conceptual limitations and extensive external structural pressures, by the late 1990s Black British Cultural Studies in its first guise had begun to dissipate. An iteration of the project was able to find an institutional home in the field of sociology, through a selective adaptation of Hall’s *New Ethnicities* thesis. The issue here though was that the work in *New Ethnicities* entailed largely jettisoning serious theoretical attention to the forms of cultural production which generated new styles of Blackness in Britain. This did not mean Black British Cultural Studies came to an end. Instead, as we set out, the impulse of the project was transferred into the field of contemporary art by two figures, John Akomfrah (as he developed a solo career following the conclusion of

1. Dhanveer Singh Brar and Ashwani Sharma, ‘What is this “Black” in Black Studies? From Black British Cultural Studies to Black Critical Thought in UK Arts and Higher Education’, *New Formations*, 99, 2020.

Black Audio Film Collective), and Kodwo Eshun (as one part of the Otolith Group with Anjalika Sagar). Such a transference was both a generative and conflicted process, in that Akomfrah and Eshun extended the life of Black British Cultural Studies well into the new millennium, but by the same measure – due the situations in which their art practice was circulated – an emphasis was placed upon contemporaneity and exceptionalism, as opposed to historicity and collectivity.

We would like to return to the afterlife of Black British Cultural Studies thesis in order to revise, complicate and deepen its implications. We wish to do so in this second article by introducing another artist into the picture, one who slipped out of the frame of our initial analysis: Steve McQueen, and in particular his most recent series of films *Small Axe*.² As such, with this follow-up piece, there are two questions to address from the outset. Firstly, why Steve McQueen? Primarily because he causes trouble for our earlier line concerning Black British Cultural Studies being diverted into artists' film and cinema, and thus forces us to rethink our claims. Steve McQueen was not an artist formed within the crucible of the 1980s Black British arts movement as it fused with the intellectual endeavours of Hall, Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby, Kobena Mercer and others. Yet as he openly acknowledges, an indelible part of his self-fashioning as an artist was the informal education he received from, and friendship he forged with, Gilroy during their time together at Goldsmiths in the early 1990s.³ Instead, McQueen's apprenticeship and eventual entry into professional art practice arose in a period that, as Kobena Mercer has explained, was far more unsettled for Black and postcolonial diasporic artists working in Britain.⁴ According to Mercer, the early 1990s were determined by a warped configuration of YBAs and their regressive modernisation, a failed attempt to launch a New Internationalist agenda in British arts, and the emergence of a type of multicultural normalisation that was accepting of difference but not its politicisation (*Ethnicity and Internationality*). For Mercer, the result was that, like his peer Chris Ofili, McQueen was initially reluctant to see his work as an artist and filmmaker overdetermined by race in order to 'evade' the 'hidden pressures' of 'ideological capture' within such a conjuncture (*Ethnicity and Internationality*, pp56-58). Instead, as Okwui Enwezor noted, much of the early film practice shown by McQueen 'privileges enunciation over style', and like one of his hero's Miles Davis, contained a muted set of political orientations.⁵

These were issues which McQueen was able to work himself free of, and in certain ways retain, as he matured. In terms of the formal elements of his work, Naomi Vogt and William J. Simmons describe a central quality of McQueen's being his capacity to play in the gaps and entanglements between intense affective attachments and historicisation.⁶ At the institutional level, this meant he was able to equalise the distinctions that exist between experimentation and documentary, or film as a medium and cinema as a commercial form,

2. Steve McQueen, *Small Axe*, BBC/Amazon Studios, 2020.

3. Paul Gilroy, 'In Conversation with Steve McQueen', *Sarah Parker Remond Centre Podcast*, 5 November 2020, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/publications/2020/nov/sprc-conversation-steve-mcqueen>

4. Kobena Mercer, 'Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness', in *Third Text*, 49, Winter 1999-2000. (Hereafter *Ethnicity and Internationality*.)

5. Okwui Enwezor, 'Haptic Visions: The Films of Steve McQueen', in *Steve McQueen*, ICA/Kunsthalle, 1999, p37.

6. Naomi Vogt, 'Small Monuments: Recording and Forgetting in the Work of Steve McQueen', *Third Text*, 29:3, 2015; William J. Simmons, 'Every Story Has Already Been Told: Steve McQueen Interview and Portfolio', *Framework*, 61:1, Spring 2020.

as signalled by his awarding of both a Turner Prize in 1999 and an Oscar in 2014. Thinking about how such formal and institutional dynamics contribute to questions of race and cultural politics in his work, Paul Gilroy said of a 2020 McQueen retrospective at Tate Modern:

McQueen has always insisted that his creative work is not political. Here, the viewer will find no acceptance of [W.E.B.] Du Bois' view of art as propaganda, nor any easy association with the existing politics of race. Those connections are implicit, not explicit: yes, race is present – it may even have supplied an essential route into the creation and interpretation of these rich works – but it is not what any of them are about.⁷

7. Paul Gilroy, 'Time and Terror: Widdershins in the Torrid Zone', in Clara Kim and Fiontain Moran (eds), *Steve McQueen*, Tate, 2020, pp21-22.

The above takes us to our second question: why only *Small Axe* and not the plethora of film works, cinematic productions and installations McQueen has put his name to? Returning to the stimulus for our first article: we began with the aim to think through the question of how and why a relatively new modality of thought from Black Studies in the USA was being taken up by an emerging cohort of contemporary artists of colour in Britain as a way to articulate questions of race in their work, without – it seemed – the type of historical and political education in place to illustrate how the new turn in Black Studies had, in significant part, adapted its imperatives from an earlier Black British Cultural Studies formation. Once again, McQueen's *Small Axe* series allows us to revise and complicate such a claim. It does so for many reasons: here we have McQueen making a piece of contemporary public television, which explicitly foregrounds the historical politics of race in Britain over a specific time-frame congruent with the making of Black British Cultural Studies (1970s and 1980s). The very existence of *Small Axe* relies on the reputation he has developed first as an international gallery artist and then as commercial filmmaker in the USA, with a defined aesthetic signature which tends to eschew racial polemics.

It is with these questions in mind that we proceed to engage with *Small Axe* on three simultaneous and intertwined levels. In the following article we intend to place McQueen's anthology in conversation with two contemporary theorists: the work of British-born Black Studies thinker, David Marriott, whose singular composition of a conceptual project on Blackness as a poetics of the unthought has brought both McQueen and Hall into its fold; and Clive Nwonka, a scholar of Black British film and television revising the frameworks of Black British Cultural Studies by giving particular attention to McQueen's practice. Fed through this exchange will be a consideration of the manner in which *Small Axe* has been framed as a public project by McQueen, as well as how the artist has used the anthology to situate himself within the British cultural landscape. Finally, we are concerned in the last instance with how the expressivity and cultural politics of *Small Axe* articulate a reconstitution of Black Britain as a social and economic formation. We take as our point

of orientation in this regard the shooting to death of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan police force on 4 August 2011.⁸ Although this may seem like an arbitrary point from which to periodise and determine the scale of analysis, we would surmise that the rebellions following Duggan's death offer a useful way to approach these films. The date of 4 August 2011 is pivotal because it put in motion a set of processes which appear wholly antagonistic, yet on closer examination are dialectically twinned. As we shall proceed to illustrate, on the one hand this period saw the installation of a new regime of data-driven racialised policing, which only served to enhance the structural violence of the state. On the other hand, 2011 also marked a line in the sand for Black British culture, whereby a new modality of cultural producer and artist began to come into view. *Small Axe*, we shall argue, both expresses and takes leadership of the points where these two tendencies generate the greatest – and therefore most productive – friction.

AUTEURIAL LICENCE

It is important not to consider *Small Axe* an exceptional undertaking. The appearance of McQueen's anthology on the BBC, as well as the Amazon streaming service, is better understood if framed as the culmination point of a decade long process of mainstream renewal for Black British Culture since the shooting to death of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan Police. In film and TV, we have had Channel 4 (2011 and 2013) and Netflix (2019 and 2022) screening *Top Boy*, two Black British actors heading up major Hollywood endeavours (Daniel Kaluuya with *Get Out* and John Boyega in *Star Wars*), and Michaela Coel achieving screenwriting success for Channel 4 and BBC (with *Chewing Gum* and *I May Destroy You*, respectively); musically there was a renewal of grime in its second wave, from whence it became the general grammar of British pop music, and was soon knocked off its top spot in the hearts of Black British youth by the arrival of drill; in the new arenas of podcasting and media streaming platforms, George the Poet and SBTv have become significant players in a crowded field; and publishing companies appear to have fallen over themselves in the rush to release new Black writing or reissue the work of older authors.⁹ Filtered through this light, McQueen's *Small Axe* can be seen as the culmination point of a tendency that has been brewing since that long hot August eleven years ago.

The task though is not simply to situate *Small Axe* within an array of Black British cultural production post-2011, but rather to consider the stakes of its role within this process of cultural renewal in the public sphere. It is with these concerns in mind that we turn to Clive Nwonka as an interlocutor. For a number of years, Nwonka has been revising the lines of thinking on Black British film and television in a way which seeks to be 'renovative rather than duplicative' when it comes to the intersection between Black British film and Cultural Studies.¹⁰ As part of his undertaking, and significantly for our purposes,

8. Haroon Siddique, 'Mark Duggan Police Shooting: Can Forensic Tech Cast Doubt on Official Report?', *The Guardian*, 10 June 2020.

9. Sarita Malik and Clive James Nwonka, 'Top Boy: Cultural Verisimilitude and the Allure of Black Criminality for UK Public Service Broadcasting Drama', in *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 14:4, 2017; Roslyn Sulcas, 'Daniel Kaluuya Isn't Waiting for Your Approval', *New York Times*, 4 January 2018; Jimi Famurewa, 'John Boyega: "I'm the Only Cast Member Whose Experience of Star Wars Was Based on Their Race"', *British GQ*, 2 September 2020; Doreen St Felix, 'Michaela Coel's Chaos and Charisma in "I May Destroy You"', *The New Yorker*, 29 June 2020; DJ T'arget, *Grime Kids: The Inside Story of The Global Grime Takeover*, Orion, 2018; Nicolas Tyrell Scott, 'Podcast: Drill Politics with Ciaran Thapar and AM', *Crack Podcast*, 12 August 2021; Paul Gilroy, 'In Conversation with George the Poet', *Sarah Parker Remond Centre Podcast*, 11 August 2020; Tom Usher, 'An Oral History of SBTv: The YouTube Channel that Blew the Doors Open for UK Rap', *Vice*, 15 December 2017; Malachi McIntosh, 'The Rise and Fall of Black British Writing', *The Conversation* 14 August 2020.

10. Clive James Nwonka, 'The Black Neoliberal Aesthetic', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25:2, 2020, p3. (Hereafter *Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*.)

Nwonka has paid close attention to Steve McQueen's transitions as a filmmaker.

One notable marker Nwonka has laid down is the identification of a 'black neoliberal aesthetic' which has increasingly come to dominate the expressive and institutional character of Black British film and TV. According to Nwonka, the Black neoliberal aesthetic has multiple dynamics and effects, but perhaps the most noticeable is the decoupling of racism from ideology. Rather than a Black British film culture capable of generating alternatives to the problem of racism in the film and television industry, we get diversity management: 'the legitimacy of neoliberal reconstruction at the very fabric of cultural life emerges at its most powerful and undetectable when aligned to blackness' (*Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*, p7). In this situation, the critical edge of perceived marginality is displaced by strategic incorporation: 'neoliberalism's dominant hold of contemporary life now very much includes blackness, black cultural products and black representations' (*Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*, p7).

For Nwonka, a central figure in this process is the Black cultural leader. Their role is to 'ensure a degree of persuasiveness, credibility and intellectual command of the racial agenda, and recruit previously oppositional sections of the population residing outside the power bloc into its sphere of influence' (*Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*, p8). The practice of leadership is not designed, nor taken up, as one necessitating the use of domination. Instead, to be a Black cultural leader in British film and television, to manage Black cultural production for the British screen, is to engender 'the *voluntary* participation of blackness' as part of a 'proactive response by the screen industries to black moral panics ... When conceived under the rubric of diversity, black cultural value and social analysis, the dynamic can be legitimised and telegraphed as a collaborative black self-dramatization' (*Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*, p8).

If then, in Nwonka's reading, the Black neoliberal aesthetic is shaped by diversity (rather than racism) and headed by exceptional leadership (rather than collective cultural labour), the ultimate effect is that it offers a 'reaffirmation of hegemony, but [is] not in itself *hegemonic*' (*Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*, p8). What he means here is that despite the appearance of voluntary participation and self-dramatisation, the products of a Black neoliberal aesthetic are never given access to the security from crisis through limitless growth and deregulation that neoliberalism is supposed to offer. Instead, Black cultural production in British film and TV, through a partial and conditional incorporation, remains vulnerable to the very racial instability it seeks to represent and escape.

It is important at this stage to signal in the clearest terms available that in his various writings on McQueen, Nwonka does not in any way place the filmmaker's body of work under his umbrella of a Black neoliberal aesthetic. In fact, Nwonka in many ways sees in McQueen's recent output a counter to the neoliberal bind Black cultural production finds itself trapped in. Yet, if we take a look at the commentary Nwonka has published on *Small Axe* (albeit brief to date), and his commentary on McQueen's *Hunger* (due to its contextual,

stylistic and political proximity to *Small Axe*), there are ways in which the case can be made for McQueen's *Small Axe* as securing and extending, as much as troubling and refusing, a Black neoliberal aesthetic.

Due to the reach of its broadcast partner, the BBC, and the prominence it was given in the programme schedules (Sunday evening, the customary slot for major dramas), *Small Axe* can be understood as a type of event television, or what Nwonka calls a 'black event, a time-bounded visual experience of black narratives ... the films have allowed black Britain to congregate over an extremely rare televisual representation of black identity, no matter the fragmentary nature of "on-demand" content and the mobile media platforms that make such time-bounded experiences less frequent'.¹¹ The series status as an event was secured by its falling under the 'anti-national national' rubric associated with the likes of Ken Loach, namely addressing a territorially specific set of societal, cultural and political questions, but seeing the territory as conflicted (in this instance the fraught, unresolved making of Black Britain).¹²

For Nwonka, McQueen's approach to such a rubric is unique due to the experience he has built up, and the success of his transition from moving image art practice to commercial film and television. Thus, in many respects, *Small Axe* represents the latest stage in his development of an 'avant-garde, hybridised cinematic language of political cinema' first seen at play in *Hunger* (*Hunger as Political Epistemology*, p134). McQueen's experimental adaptation from gallery space to big and domestic screen, argues Nwonka, rests on his singular approach to verisimilitude, political value and historicity. *Small Axe* therefore 'cannot be judged exclusively from the perspective of narrative fidelity, but should consider its more salient heterogenous textual utilities ... this radical form of biographical representation through a series of interpretative examples linking its aesthetic tapestry to its broader, equally complex political imperative' (*Hunger as Political Epistemology*, p135).

Demanding more of the viewer's interpretative and conceptual capacity when watching historical-political drama, McQueen's use of 'biographical realism and art film hybridity ... produces a text reliant both on a fidelity to history and on the conceivability of entirely imagined moments' (*Hunger as Political Epistemology*, p142). In Nwonka's view, a series such as *Small Axe* 'is able to transcend the barriers of conventional film form and content via the auteurs ingrained treatment of film not as commerce but discursive art form, departing radically from a recognisable genre and to a subversive cinematic language' (*Hunger as Political Epistemology*, p147).

Nwonka sees in McQueen's auteurship, the artistic authority he has accumulated, the very basis from which *Small Axe* initiates a break from the enveloping presence of a Black neoliberal aesthetic in British film and television:

Rather than seeking to provide the definitive answer to both racial inequality and the methods of redressing it in commissioning policies, *Small Axe* asks the nation to rethink the expectations of black British

11. Clive James Nwonka, 'Small Axe Has Become a Unique Cultural Event for Black Britain', *Big Issue*, 13 December 2020. (Hereafter *Small Axe Has Become a Unique Cultural Event*.)

12. Clive James Nwonka, 'Hunger as Political Epistemology', *Studies in European Cinema*, 13:2, 2016, p138. (Hereafter *Hunger as Political Epistemology*.)

drama. It primarily speaks to Black Britain before it speaks to a white British media landscape and its perpetual complexities over how to manage racial difference ... [*Small Axe*] has a willingness to confront the historical conflicts at the heart of the formation of black British identity, an experience within a particular historical period, without bearing the burden of presenting a future plan for the industry (*Small Axe Has Become a Unique Cultural Event*).

Despite Nwonka's positioning of *Small Axe* as reinvigorating the ideological question of race in British public life, and thus via McQueen's imprint, not allowing the series to become incorporated into institutional self-dramatisation that determines a Black neoliberal aesthetic, we wish to point to ways in which these very features of *Small Axe* also permit a Black neoliberal aesthetic to be folded back in and extended. The crux of our argument rests on the sleight of hand that exists between auteurship and leadership, and the question of the history of Black British film which nags away at *Small Axe's* claims on Black British history.

Such a sleight of hand was dramatised during an interview McQueen conducted with historian and television producer David Olusoga for *Sight and Sound* in December 2020. Forming the centrepiece of a special issue to mark the release of *Small Axe*, both Olusoga and McQueen play their parts in framing the project as a heroically singular endeavour. The thread running through their conversation is that the films illuminate 'lost epochs in the history of Black Britain', a line McQueen is only too willing to embrace: 'For me, these films should have been made thirty-five years ago, twenty-five years ago, but they weren't and I suppose in my mad head, I wanted to make as many films as I could to fix that.'¹³ It is disappointing that Olusoga elects to leave this claim unexamined, because if we take a closer look, it then appears neglectful. Stretching from the mid-1970s through the tail end of the 1990s, there was a variegated yet definitive project of Black British film making, which sought to depict, dramatise and critically analyse the making of new iterations of Blackness at the heart of a collapsing imperial state. The vast majority of this work was publicly funded, and more often than not was screened on terrestrial television during a period when consumer choice was comparatively limited. It is possible, therefore, to take each component of *Small Axe* as a series and find in this already existing Black British cinematic archive, a corresponding film which, to varying degrees, either addresses the very same event, or speaks to concurrent conditions.

Take as an example the following representative (but by no means exhaustive) list: Franco Rosso's *Mangrove Nine* (1973), produced by Horace Ove, director of *Pressure* (1976); Menelik Shabazz's *Burning an Illusion* and *Blood Ah Go Run*; Franco Rosso again, with his 1980 feature *Babylon*; Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986); Martine Atille's *Dreaming Rivers* (1988); and *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) by Isaac Julien. In their respective

13. David Olusoga and Steve McQueen, 'These Are the Untold Stories that Make Up Our Nation', *Sight and Sound*, December 2020, p26. (Hereafter *These Are the Untold Stories*.)

pieces for the *Sight and Sound* special issue, Jay Bernard and Alex Ramon direct readers to such a presence in cinematic memory, yet as critic Ashley Clarke has pointed out, this period of production now largely operates as a ‘ghost canon of British filmmaking: urgent work that has often been overlooked, actively suppressed, or left to languish in the margins, unloved or inaccessible’.¹⁴ The spectral after-life of late twentieth-century Black British film is not our primary concern here. The pressing question is why (or perhaps even how) McQueen chooses not to acknowledge these works. It is difficult to imagine that he is unaware of their existence, given his social and artistic formation. Even if that were the case, one would expect a dedicated team of researchers to have engaged with such historical materials and made them available to McQueen as part of the process of assembling *Small Axe*. Considered in this light, McQueen’s assertion that he is fixing a decades-long problem not only doubles down on the precarious status of the ghost canon, but more worryingly, it feels like a leadership strategy.

Which brings us back to Clive Nwonka. On the one hand we have his positing of a Black neoliberal aesthetic which relies on the marking out of cultural leadership. On the other he deploys auteurship as the condition of possibility for McQueen’s entry into mainstream cinema and television. Perhaps in our present conjuncture, the lines between racial leadership and the racialised auteur in the cultural industries are not as distinct as previously thought. In fact, it might be that the discursive framing of *Small Axe* relies on unsettling such lines, even to the extent that the status of leader and auteur become co-constitutive. Consider the following from Olusoga and McQueen on the task of presenting ‘new’ cinematic Black histories to the British viewing public:

OLUSOGA: ...But these stories wouldn’t have been told if you hadn’t made these films.

MCQUEEN: Well, this is a bit upsetting, David. Sometimes ... I want the burden. I hope that by doing it, one can inspire other people to do other things. It’s like when you make a programme. To push on the next generation. But when you say that, it scares me.

OLUSOGA: You used the word that I was going to, which is ‘burden’; the ‘burden of representation’.

MCQUEEN: Give it to me. I want the burden. (*These Are the Untold Stories*, p29).

Small Axe, as an ‘anti-national national event’ is being taken to some strange places. The screening of modern Black British history appears to be hanging by a thread, and McQueen makes it his burden to conduct a rescue mission.

14. Ashley Clarke, ‘Scenes from a Hostile Environment: A History of Black British Protest Film and Television’, *Sight and Sound*, 7 August 2020.

Here we have the self-dramatisation of the lone Black British film director ensuring a command of the cultural agenda on race in neoliberal austerity Britain, by deploying his own credibility as an auteur and eliding the work of numerous Black filmmakers who initiated the very project he claims as uniquely his own.

LEADERSHIP AS FORM

The problem nagging away here is not restricted to the talk surrounding *Small Axe* either. As James S. Williams informs us, it also determines the expressive and formal dynamics of the films as aesthetic objects. Williams is primarily concerned with a troublingly ambivalent approach to historical verisimilitude occupying much of *Small Axe*. For Williams, the combination of looking to retrieve Black British history in film, whilst simultaneously ‘swerving away’ from its evidentiary markers means: ‘*Small Axe* is not a historical chronicle with pretensions of providing historical truth. Rather, its approach to Black history, which McQueen raids selectively for personal stories and elements of local legend and folklore ... is tangential.’¹⁵ The difference between an attempt (however incomplete and partial) to chronicle in favour of selective raiding is that the cinematic sense of Black working classes in Britain spontaneously self-organising is displaced by narratives built on individuation:

McQueen is ultimately concerned less with collective experience – such as the shared common stories of the Windrush generation and its descendants – than with individual acts ... he champions exceptional individual achievements against the odds by unlikely heroes and pioneers who struck out audaciously on their own and transformed themselves in the process (*Redemption Song*, pp57-8).

Such a choice, or rather a strategy, on the part of the director, inevitably plays out as a formal characteristic: ‘In fact, what seems to propel *Small Axe* from within is a desire to use a combination of style, physicality and pure presence to forge timeless, transformative and redemptive moments of Black reality that transcend the commonly prescribed codes of social performance and code switching’ (*Redemption Song*, p60).

These cinematic and extra-cinematic questions concerning cultural leadership and aesthetic individuation synthesise across the work of the *Small Axe*, both through narrative structures and expressive devices. In fact, the question that the opening episode of the series – *Mangrove* – looks to pose is that of Black political leadership. The film is concerned with the resources of Black political leadership (where does it come from) and its enactment (what forms does it take). When it comes to announcing the *Small Axe* project though, *Mangrove* is unique in the way it seeks to stage a fusion between leadership as it was understood during the time of the Mangrove events

15. James S. Williams, ‘Redemption Song: Performing Black History and Masculinity’, *Film Quarterly*, 74:4, 2021, p57. (Hereafter *Redemption Song*.)

(late 1960s and early 1970s in post-imperial London) and the problematic of Black cultural leadership in twenty-first-century Britain which appears to a motivating factor for Steve McQueen in this endeavour.

During the time of the film's events, leadership is a Jamesian question and the Trinidadian thinker serves as a guide. *Mangrove* lays out its terms with an introductory sequence following Shaun Parkes' Frank Crichlow walking through Notting Hill, whilst Darcus Howe (Malachi Kirby) reads aloud a passage on the making of revolutionary working-class leadership from C.L.R. James' 1958 text *Facing Reality*. This sets the tone for the viewer as they track Crichlow's conflicted path from owner of a 'respectable' Black business to custodian of a communal refuge. There is a strategic reinforcement of the Jamesian imperative throughout the film, with Howe repeatedly seen reading *The Black Jacobins* (first published 1938), the presence of C.L.R. himself, and alongside Crichlow the more pedagogically conscious, if slightly socially less mature, figures of Howe, Althea Jones-Lecointe (Letitia Wright) and Barbara Beese (Rochenda Sandall). To hammer the message home, we see posters of Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Paul Bogle on the walls of the restaurant. Even on its own terms, the citational practice in *Mangrove* could be considered internally confused. The thread running through *The Black Jacobins* was that of leaders being made by the revolution through contact with masses in need of instruction. By the time of *Facing Reality*, James had jettisoned the earlier position in favour of a model of self-organised class spontaneity that was incompatible with vanguardism. This was a point he pushed further still in the late 1960s – as evidenced by lectures he delivered in Montreal – at a time broadly concurrent with events in the film.¹⁶

The above only serves to heighten the disparity between the Jamesian question of leadership as it pertains to the time of *Mangrove* and the idea of leadership as an auteur's responsibility shaping the contemporary fabric of the film's production. The connection between the internal life of *Mangrove*'s narrative and McQueen's public statements about what drove his commitment to this project comes via the minor character of Granville. During a long night of the soul in an improvised gambling spot, Crichlow's attempts to bet away the keys to the restaurant are thrown back at him with Granville's reminder that the Mangrove is a burden he will have to carry alone.

Red, White and Blue is equally concerned with leadership, yet in this third film of the series it takes on different appearance with an almost total excision of James's radicalism in favour of a bootstraps logic. The predominant thread of *Red, White and Blue* is established in its prologue. We see a 14-year old Leroy Logan absent-mindedly waiting outside a set of school gates, impeccably dressed in uniform, holding a musical instrument in a case: the image of the model pupil. The mundanity of this scene is broken up when two policemen enter to conduct an absurd search of the child, before his father arrives to intervene. During the ensuing car-ride, Logan Senior reminds his son that the only authority he needs to submit to is that of his father. To paraphrase

16. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, Secker and Warburg, 1938; C.L.R. James, Cornelius Castoriadis and Grace Lee Boggs, *Facing Reality*, Detroit, Correspondence, 1958; C.L.R. James, *You Don't Play With Revolution: The Montreal Lectures of C.L.R. James*, David Austin (ed.), AK Press, 2009.

17. Paul Gilroy, 'It's a Family Affair: Black Culture and the Trope of Kinship', in *Small Axe: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, Serpent's Tail, 1993.

18. David Lloyd, 'Going Nowhere: Oral Space in the Cell Block', in *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity, 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p156. (Hereafter *Going Nowhere*.)

a well-known essay, we could call *Red, White and Blue* a family affair as much as it is a thesis on leadership, this time with authority (that of the father competing with the police force) as the battleground.¹⁷

There are a clear set of themes weaved together in *Red, White and Blue* both through the content and the depiction of central figures, with a focus on characterisation worked out through the action of and upon the body. Questions of leadership and authority, alongside masculinity, patriarchy and fatherhood are fractiously knitted into community, institution and nation, with duty (whether to one's family, people, or the force) set up as the pinch point.

It is Leroy Logan (played by John Boyega) who carries this burden in *Red, White and Black*. If we filter the screening and occupation of Logan (by McQueen and Boyega respectively), through David Lloyd's reading of Bobby Sands, the H-Block blanket protests and hunger strikes as they are dramatised by Michael Fassbinder and McQueen in *Hunger*, then we can see how leadership, authority and individual exceptionalism are not features unique to *Small Axe*. Logan's desire to politically reform the Metropolitan Police from within and to do so alone (to differentiate it from Sand's act of revolutionary will), is presented in 'the isolating glare of an almost transcendental light', especially when his Asian comrade inside the force decides he has had enough, leaving Logan cut off from any contact with other workers of colour in an empty changing room.¹⁸ Similarly, the decision to abandon a research career in science to take on the lonesome task of proving to the police that Black people are competent enforcers of the law 'appears only as [Logan's] individual sacrificial act' (*Going Nowhere*, p156). Finally, the way in which 'the emphasis falls on the loneliness of the long distance hunger striker, meticulously and painstakingly represented breath by breath' in *Hunger* is transposed onto the image of Logan completing circuits of the 400 metre athletic track, initially defeating the friend who recruited him, but as his alienation intensifies, his only running buddy (and punchbag) is his own frustration and despair (*Going Nowhere*, p156).

Of the five films which make up *Small Axe*, it is *Red, White and Blue* where the deftness and complexity of Black music is put to most creative use, allowing it to heighten dramatic transitions and establish recurring motifs. This is achieved through the establishment of Logan as a soul music lover. Following an earlier introduction of Al Green whilst Logan is working in a laboratory, the Reverend returns to animate a crucial moment in the film's development. His father's impromptu offer to drive Logan to Hendon and begin training as a police officer leads to the introduction of 'How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?'. It's an astute choice, because Green's mournful ballad is able to contain both Logan Senior's disapproval of his son's choice and their first step towards reconciliation when he calls out to his son for an embrace.

Such a delicate use of the soul music repertoire is further at play with Imagination's 'So Good, So Right'. The British group are sewn into the fabric of Logan's story (the group's lead singer, Leece John is his cousin, and

John's mother encourages Logan to consider the Met as a career option). 'So Good, So Right' operates as an audio signal to the viewer during a segment where Logan is sat in his car at a set of traffic lights and looks over to see a uniformed Black officer sat parallel to him in a police vehicle. 'You look at me/I look at you/Nothing more to say', sings his cousin over the car stereo, as Logan appears to make his decision to sign up. The device of the look recurs throughout *Red, White and Blue*: Logan can be seen frequently gazing at the police uniform, either adorning his body or as it hangs on his bedroom door; during his application interview he tells the panel of officers that he wants them to 'look at each other in the eye, man to man'; and when he goes to check on his father in the toilets at court, Logan finds him staring into the mirror.

It is at this point that we can turn to David Marriott's work on the formal strategies of Steve McQueen's early film practice as a contemporary artist to give us further purchase on the types of motifs set out above in *Small Axe*. In the case of the look, analysing McQueen through Fanon's observations on cinema, Marriott describes the look as 'a key figure for understanding the *epidermalization* of social being', not though as the 'sensorial equivalence of a more general politics of being; they are themselves that politics'.¹⁹ The look, as it falls on and around Logan's uniformed body, appears to operate in *Red, White and Blue* as the connective tissue between leadership, authority and individual sacrifice.

19. David Marriott, 'Waiting to Fall', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 13:3, Winter 2013, pp172-173. (Hereafter *Waiting to Fall*.)

Other than a poor remake of Franco Rosso's *Babylon*, one way to reflect on *Alex Wheatle* is as a further thesis on authority. Much like *Mangrove*, there are hints of an ur-text or rather ur-concept lingering in the background: namely the question of interpellation as it appears in Stuart Hall, Chas Chritchler, Tony Jefferson, John Clark and Brian Roberts' *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (1978). If read through this foundational Black British Cultural Studies text, then in *Alex Wheatle* we have contesting attempts to authorise a Black social subject. On one side of the antagonism there are a range of overlapping state institutions (social care, school, welfare, police) seeking to produce a pathological legal entity who can be violated at will. On the other hand, and what appears to win out (although not without severe psychic cost), is the cross-hatching of everyday Black social life (or 'colony culture' as Hall et al. might put it) and the intellectual trajectories of the Black radical tradition (C.L.R. James again). The latter provides the young Wheatle with the resources to author(ise) his own consciousness. A similar dynamic arguably shapes the final film in the series, *Education*.

Yet it would be an error to read *Alex Wheatle* as a Black British Cultural Studies screenplay. The two extended moments, one early in the film and the other mid-way through, where we see Wheatle physically restrained by the instruments of the state and thrown to the floor, give us food for thought. Lying prone, staring not with intent but with 'an indifference to either becoming or living on in time', McQueen appears to have Wheatle falling into representation: 'this is where McQueen's cinema begins, and in

this nothing without destination is the pure abandon of a fall, one that can only maintain its suspenseful character by stating the continual impossibility of landing' (*Waiting to Fall*, p180, p216).

Lisa Palmer's assertion that *Lovers Rock* is occupied by 'moments of contrived nostalgia' comes as close as one possibly could to naming the difficulties of this film.²⁰ It is a work that somehow manages to be both unremarkable and remarkably troubling. The issue of nostalgia arrives through the way *Lovers Rock* takes on the feel of a costume drama. Relying heavily on style to stand in for characterisation, what we get is a large dose of anachronistic idealisation. Contrivance comes to the fore through the two heightened invocations of sonic experience as the young dancers are gathered around the sound system. It is difficult to imagine that the extended collective acapella of Janet Kay's 'Silly Games' and the mosh pit induced by The Revolutionaries' 'Kunta Kinte' would have occurred in this way. The oral histories of sound systems in 1970s and 1980s Britain, or the presentations of this cultural form by Menelik Shabazz, Franco Rosso or Molly Dineen puts into question *Lovers Rock*'s claims on social reality.²¹ These two moments (differentiated along gender lines) appear to be concerted attempts to confect the ecstatic communal experience of a sound system on screen for a contemporary audience, in lieu of a serious, critically-engaged aesthetic strategy to remain faithful to the experience in its historical setting.

David Marriott though, offers a way to partially rescue *Lovers Rock*. In his reading of McQueen's early installation work, Marriott makes a case for modes of suspension and interval as the unacknowledged heart of the artist's project:

Suspension names both a purging of story or plot from films that seem unresolved and open-ended and our exposure to images that provoke in us a sense of uneasiness, or indetermination ... that takes us beyond the representable, but that does not allow itself to be simply seen, or thought, but is indicated laterally, figuratively, at the heart of what we see, but as what disturbs such seeing (*Waiting to Fall*, p179).

If the uneasiness of seeing the camera descend with a group of young Black men at a 1980s sound system party, as they rip each others' clothes off and throw each other to the ground upon encountering a highly resonant rhythm track, can be understood as a purging of story (or history) in favour of disturbing a presumed representational regime, then we might have something to work with. By giving over the 'Kunta Kinte' scene to an understanding of suspension and interval, it becomes possible to think of *Lovers Rock* as McQueen retaining and translating a feature of his early practice into mainstream television:

... this irreducible spacing within the time of the image, which stems from the notion that meaning is exiled, or liberated, emancipated by the

20. Lisa Palmer, 'Small Axe: What Steve McQueen Got Right and Wrong About *Lovers Rock*', *The Conversation*, 30 November 2020, <https://theconversation.com/small-axe-what-steve-mcqueen-got-right-and-wrong-about-lovers-rock-151068>

21. <https://www.mixcloud.com/BassCultureduk/>

camera's movement ... this empty spatiality which appears to be *part* of the image (and so integral to any possible relation between thought and image) entails that anything whatsoever is filmable, because events can never be made legible as contingencies, as something unprecedented, unpredictable *as* image. Which means that the image must always run the risk of nonsense as part of its meaning, the risk of the world giving itself to be seen, no long as the order of events, but as insignificant happenings (*Waiting to Fall*, p232).

The wrapping together of leadership and individuation, authority and state racism, as the dominant threads in *Small Axe*, must be placed alongside the flashes of sensory destabilisation occurring simultaneously to both individual figures and the camera itself. The question then becomes one of the aesthetic, cultural and political purpose of *Small Axe* as a whole. What is Steve McQueen trying to achieve here, both for the set of films as films, and for himself as a director? This question allows us to return to the post-2011 conjuncture put forward earlier as the most adequate framework through which to approach the project. In effect, we want to delve deeper into the story of what took place in Black Britain in the aftermath of the rebellions following Mark Duggan's fatal shooting by the Metropolitan Police. This period saw a significant shift in the policing of young Black populations, and we believe that if we pay close attention to the nature of this shift, we can find in the changing techniques of racist policing a dialectical resonance with the styles of individuation *Small Axe* aestheticises and the modality of cultural leadership Steve McQueen narrates for himself as director.

TOTAL POLICING

Reporting on the police and criminal justice response to the six-month period following the rebellions, Lee Bridges mapped the scale of the operation:

as of 27th February 2012, a total of over 4,000 riot related arrests had been carried out in London, with a further 150 being anticipated in each of the following months. This has been the result of a major post-riot operation, in which more than 500 officers and other police staff have undertaken analysis of CCTV footage of the various riot locations and used this to identify arrestees.²²

The immediate cost of such a strategy was £35million, but more importantly, under-resourced prisons were flooded with a new intake, meaning longer-term socialisation in the criminal justice system became an inevitable effect. Out of all riot-related convictions, 64 per cent led to direct custody, with an average of fourteen-month sentences, this being three times above the standard conviction rate for similar offences and four times the length

22. Lee Bridges, 'Four Days in August: The UK Riots', *Race and Class*, 54:1, 2012, p7. (Hereafter *Four Days in August*.)

sentences usually given. Of the numbers charged, 27 per cent were juveniles (aged seventeen and below), 26 per cent were eighteen to twenty. In terms of racial-ethnic composition, 41 per cent were white, 39 per cent Black, 6 per cent Asian, and 14 per cent mixed or other ethnicity (*Four Days in August*, pp7-8). Although the policy recommendations from a cross-party panel of MPs focussed on increased family intervention, schools training on personal character, and the increased integration between entrepreneurship and education, the Met response to their loss of control over the city was a ‘Total War on Crime’ (*Four Days in August*).

According to the Met, such a Total War (or what was alternatively known as Total Policing) was built around a data-led approach, where the focus would shift from reaction to prediction. This strategy was organised through three interlocking areas – gangs, knife-crime and joint-enterprise – each designed to pre-emptively identify those most likely to enter into the types of criminality the police and state construed as the causes of August 2011. Inevitably, as with most law and order strategies in modern Britain, Total Policing had a heavily imbalanced racialised edge.

Patrick Williams has been at the forefront of criticism of the gangs strand of the new horizon of policing, through his work on the development of the Gangs Matrix:

Responding to the civil unrest that took place in 2011 across London and other cities in the country, the Metropolitan Police service and former mayor of London, Boris Johnson, introduced the Gangs Violence Matrix in 2012. The Gangs Matrix is a database containing the names and personal information of people suspected to be ‘gang nominals’. Underpinning the database is a set of algorithms that use an established scoring criterion to generate an automated violence ranking for individuals. Each person receives a ranking classification of either red, amber or green. Controversial at the time of its inception, the database was created as an intelligence tool that monitors and manages people identified to be involved in criminal activity. It has continued to gain notoriety over the years with critics highlighting the blatant racial disparity.²³

Of the people captured in this automated database, 87 per cent were Black and minority ethnic, with the vast majority being under twenty-one, going to as young as twelve. Even if these numbers were not enough to question the legitimacy of this intelligence tool, several observers expressed:

grave concerns about the lack of transparency and oversight around the actual process of how people are added to and removed from the database ... approximately 40% of the people on the Matrix are not recorded as being involved in violent crime yet are subject to enhanced police scrutiny. The seemingly unrestricted sharing of information between

23. Patrick Williams, *Being Matrixed: The (Over)policing of Gang Suspects in London*, Stopwatch: Research and Actions for Fair and Inclusive Policing, 2018, p6. (Hereafter *Being Matrixed*.)

statutory agencies, education institutions and voluntary and community organisations also poses problems as the gang member label acts as a red flag and results in detrimental consequences for the person that is meant to be receiving ‘support’ to cease criminality (*Being Matrixed*, p7).

As the authorial collective of *Empires Endgame* point out, the very positing of the ‘gang’ as a listed criminal offence is nebulous. Instead, the notion of ‘gang’ is a category of crime: ‘produced by melding together a collection of already existing offences, popular fears and racist images. The definitions of ‘the gang’ ... remain so fluid and ambiguous that they allow for the production of suspect communities, rather than individual suspects. Black working-class boys ... are all potential gang members.’²⁴

Alongside the production of a suspect community of Black working-class children, the Gangs Matrix also manufactured an industry for the funnelling of state money reliant on the identification of such a population:

the police and community stakeholders engage in a process of ‘chasing gangs’ as a strategy for attracting government funds and resources. The UK’s gang industry is contingent upon the maintenance of a discourse requiring the police and wider CJ [criminal justice] agencies, supported by co-opted voluntary and community sector organisations, to quantify the danger and ‘risk’ posed to members of the public.²⁵

As flimsy and debilitating as it is, one of the primary ‘offences’ the Met pursued through the Gangs Matrix strategy was knife crime (another category of crime, rather than listed offence). In much the same way that the Matrix gathered information and assessed public threat, knife-crime prevention orders used a similar illogical duality of speculation and enforcement:

That is, the individual subject to a knife-crime prevention order does not need to have been convicted of carrying a knife, caught by police while carrying a knife, or even seen by a member of the public carrying a knife. Thus, the offences do not have to be proven beyond reasonable doubt, only evidenced on a ‘balance of probabilities’, as more likely than not to have been committed, a much lower standard of proof (*Empires Endgame*, p36).

The totalising nature of the post-2011 law and order policing strategy was tied together through the expansion of the common-law Joint Enterprise doctrine by the judiciary. Implemented by the then Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer, Joint Enterprise involved charging large numbers of young Black people ‘on the basis of mere foresight rather than intent’ if someone else connected to them on the Gangs Matrix was also charged with an offence.²⁶ Their actual physical proximity to the incident in question, or the nature of their connection to the defendant, played little to no role in their case. The

24. Sita Balani, Luke De Noronha, Adam Elliott-Cooper, Kerem Nisancioglu, Kojo Koram, Nadine El-Nany, Dalia Gebrial and Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Empires Endgame: Racism and the British State*, Pluto Press, 2021, p51. (Hereafter *Empires Endgame*.)

25. Patrick Williams, ‘Criminalising the Other: Challenging the Race-Gang Nexus’, *Race and Class*, 56:3, 2015, p31.

26. Lee Bridges, ‘The Case Against Joint-Enterprise’, *Race and Class*, 54:4, 2013, p37.

best way to characterise Total Policing, as the Met's response to the rebellions of 2011, is that put forward by the authors of *Empires Endgame*. Rather than a strategy of criminalisation, it is more accurate to think of it as a form of control that is 'pre-criminal, post-criminal or extra-criminal' (*Empires Endgame*, p37).

CULTIVATION OF WILL

To make the case that Total Policing in part laid the groundwork for the cultural politics of *Small Axe* we need to bring Paul Gilroy into the picture. Across two essays published in 2013 (therefore far enough from the immediate aftermath of 2011 and fully in the jaws of Total Policing), Gilroy considers the political discourse of personal responsibility and individual moral failings that came to the fore in the wake of August 2011. This appears as part of a wider reflection on Black vernacular neoliberalism – something he identifies as the emergent (and likely soon to become dominant) tendency in Black Britain – the primary characteristic of which being 'a cultivation of will [that] necessitates a privatisation of resistance'.²⁷ Gilroy's commentary on the state of Black Britain post-2011 becomes even more fascinating when filtered through the fact he was a consultant on *Small Axe*.

Gilroy believes the rebellions of 2011 need to be understood as the return of the restless ghosts of 1981. Using these two events in modern Black British history as a way to measure continuities and breaks makes sense because the spectre of racism and policing hangs over both. More significantly, the shattered loops that brings 2011 into the fold of a scenario thirty years previous means 'a host of questions that had been left pending by the general failure to come to terms either with 1981 or the morbid, postcolonial politics of race, class and nation that animated it' bubbled back up to the surface.²⁸

He is clear though that even as they share commonalities, there are crucial differences in the way state and civil society responded to the questions each posed. What marked out 2011 as novel was, Gilroy argues, that 'this time, no progressive reforms of discriminatory policing or uneven, colour coded law would follow. No deepening of democracy would be considered as part of any post-riot adjustments to the country's politics of inclusion' (*1981 and 2011*, p553). Such a shift in response was an expression of broader reconfigurations of the arrangements between state and capital. Whereas in 1981, neoliberalism (as the political articulation of finance capital) still had to win the argument, by 2011 it looked as if all bets were off:

Democracy's steady evacuation by the governmental agents of corporate and managerial populism was too far advanced. The market state that had been dreamed about was now a capacious and destructive actor, privatising and outsourcing government functions while managing to incorporate those who had the most to lose into the destruction of the public institutions on which they relied (*1981 and 2011*, p553).

27. Paul Gilroy, "'We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under...': Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism', *New Formations*, 80/81, 2013, p29. (Hereafter *We Got to Get Over*.)

28. Paul Gilroy, '1981 and 2011: From Social Democratic to Neoliberal Rioting', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112:3, 2013, p551. (Hereafter *1981 and 2011*.)

The way Gilroy saw this playing out in 2011 through the tightening web of media commentary and political rhetoric, was that any attempt to consider the concrete factors which actually motivated the rebels were refused: 'the new norms specified by generalised individuation and privatisation were able to reframe the disorders as a brisk sequence of criminal events and transgressions that could be intelligible only when seen on the scale of personal conduct' (*1981 and 2011*, p555). Instead – whether coming from the standard vehicles of the right, voices pushing a muscular brand of market liberalism, or even those 'respected figures' on the left who many mistakenly felt should have known better – the political consensus seemed to be that the 2011 rebellions lacked any serious content precisely because of the form they took:

The pampered young rioters and looters of 2011 were selfish, sensation seeking and probably bored. They seized the things that only their fecklessness prevented them from being able to buy in the normal manner. The neoliberal catechism repeated in inner city 'academies' and mentorship programmes insisted that the preconditions for personal success are now in place regardless of growing inequality (*1981 and 2011*, p555).

Gilroy's analysis of 2011 and its surrounding discourse did not begin and end with the rebellions in and of themselves. He sensed in the rapidity and intensity of the state response an impact which had the potential to run deep into the lifeworld of Black Britain. The central premise on his part was that as much as the punitive measures of Total Policing were thought to be required, for the British national project to sustain itself (via the mechanics of renewal) some incorporation of Black Britain had to be seen to take place, if only on terms set by the nation.

As such, Gilroy saw the 2012 London Olympics as the ideal occasion for 'the welcome redemption of a riot-torn nation' (*1981 and 2011*, p557). Over the course of another long hot summer, a host of Black and Minority Ethnic athletes could be seen making the claim (explicitly or implicitly) that whilst racism was an undeniable factor of modern life, if overcome, such a barrier could serve as the springboard to personal success:

The particular forms of postcolonial celebrity that become visible under the existential glare of the military-entertainment complex are also imagined to represent and even embody the valour, tenacity and intelligence that characterises the exercise of 'leadership' skills. The same 'skill-set' builds character and communicates positively on the sports-field, in the boxing ring and in the boardroom alike. How that motivational logic can be shared is a mystery known only to an elite cast of after-dinner speechmakers, but its contemporary potency is scarcely in doubt. Sport, like the military

experiences upon which it so regularly signifies, is thought to provide a means to instil uniquely desirable qualities. However, it has also been used to generate a large mirror in which the division of the neoliberal world into a new configuration – the two great tribes of winners and losers – can be glimpsed and made legitimate (*We Got to Get Over*, p25).

To pitch the labour of professional athletes as evidence of the inevitability of a market society took a monumental effort on the part of broadcasters, journalists, corporations, sponsors and politicians, but the synergy generated was worth it. The point Gilroy was making here was that the very idea that access to a type of leadership was open to everyday Black Britons, if only they could display the level of personal will and sacrifice embodied by Mo Farah or Jessica Ennis-Hill, had an insidious effect:

the disquieting prospect of today's black and multi-culti Britons not exactly as ideal neoliberal subjects, but as people whose testing life experiences can increase their vulnerability to the seductions of a vernacular neoliberalism. The dreams of uplift, security and possibly, the prospect of hope in a better future secured through the consistently hard yet always ennobling labour, are gathered into the familiar neoliberal concept of 'aspiration'. The idea that anyone can be helped by government to change themselves and thereby to alter their life chances by the sheer, dedicated force of their own will, is now fundamental to the legitimacy of neoliberal reform and the notions of merit that it still seems to need. My unpopular point is that this poetics operates very powerfully, and often unrecognised, when it appears in blackface (*We Got to Get Over*, p26).

The chilling claim on Gilroy's part is that once the logics of merit and aspiration take hold, rather than being weakened by a structural analysis of and collective response to racial prejudice, Black vernacular neoliberalism relies in part on such analyses and the barriers placed on genuine grassroots radical organisation:

The continuing effects of systematic racism on black life cannot be dismissed and there are instances where that very impact seems – perhaps even where racism is to be sacrificed in capital's interests – to have inclined people towards the solutions proffered by neoliberal styles of thought which can be taken over, possessed and made one's own. In other words, the history of being denied recognition as an individual has actually enhanced the appeal of particular varieties of extreme individualism. It is absurd to imagine that the trans-national formation of black Atlantic culture is somehow permanently sanctified by its historic roots in the suffering of slaves. That noble history offers no prophylaxis against the selfish ecstasy of neoliberal norms (*We Got to Get Over*, p35).

CONCLUSION

By way of leading into a set of concluding remarks, we feel it is necessary to offer some clarifications. It would be a mistake to think that what we are arguing for is a comparative analysis between Black British cinema and television of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and the screen practice of Steve McQueen under conditions of advanced neoliberalism. Our aim has not been to frame the former as a golden period of aesthetically and politically radical filmmaking, and the latter as somehow diminished by comparison. Such an analysis would involve eliding the fact that conditions for independent Black film have shifted dramatically over the intervening period. Furthermore, it would only add to the mistaken view that the ghost canon of Black British cinema was purely an effect of conditions, rather than the product of an intent on the part of a cohort of collectives to generate the conditions for their own public reception.²⁹

Rather, what does concern us is the disjunctive interplay between the formal and narrative logics of *Small Axe* and McQueen's public presentation of his solo-exercise, between the re-imaging of crucial decades in the making of modern Black Britain for audiences ideologically primed for renderings of leadership, and the absencing of a sense that such cultural work had already been rehearsed. It is for this reason that we wish to conclude by taking Gilroy's diagnosis of Black vernacular neoliberalism in early twenty-first-century Britain and thinking it through *Small Axe*. The manner in which he pinpoints the production of leadership, authority and individuation through the fact of racism – rather than an aversion to it – allows us to address the questions concerning McQueen's project guiding this article. There is a nagging, alluring, double bind that occupies the *Small Axe* collection and McQueen's positioning of it within modern Black British culture. In many respects, an artistic undertaking of this magnitude, supported by the state broadcaster, put together by a Black filmmaker with a highly developed signature imprint, has undeniable charge. Across the series of five films viewers are required to sit with a carefully composed version of Black life being disturbed by its assembly in 1970s and 1980s Britain. At the same time, there is an equally undeniable dimension to the series – along with McQueen's framing of it – that causes disquiet. We can substantiate such a claim by using the terms of Gilroy's post-2011 analysis. In many ways, the production and aesthetics of – and commentary on – *Small Axe* is a sign that the very work Black sporting prowess was being asked to do in 2012, has now become the task of cultural production. With the obvious modification that culture is not a zero-sum game, we can say that *Small Axe* as a long-format serialised film displays preoccupations with ideas of merit, uplift and security. In its valorisation of largely individuated and exceptional forms of resistance, *Small Axe* actually relies upon a partial acknowledgement that structural racism is the background noise to all its action. Yet attempts to image – even in a fragmented manner – the unseen

29. John Akomfrah, 'Black Independent Film-making: A Statement by Black Audio/Film Collective', in *Artrage: Inter-Cultural Arts Magazine*, Summer 1983; Lina Gopaul, 'Which Way Forward', in Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (eds), *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982-1998*, FACT/University of Liverpool Press, 2007.

contours of race and nation rarely occur because that is not the point. Instead, what we have with *Small Axe* is a collection of alluringly crafted narratives of prototypical Black British leadership. Hence, this is why Steve McQueen has to similarly narrate the mission to make this project as his personal burden. It seems he may have staked it all for a chance at a genuine piece of the hegemonic pie. Such a rhetorical act of invention becomes necessary if we read burden as the gift of will from an auteur who is in the process of attaining a position of cultural leadership before our very eyes. The question is what does this mean for a Black British cultural politics to come?

Dhanveer Singh Brar is Lecturer in Black British History in the School of History at the University of Leeds.

Ashwani Sharma is Senior Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies, London College of Communication, University of the Arts, London.