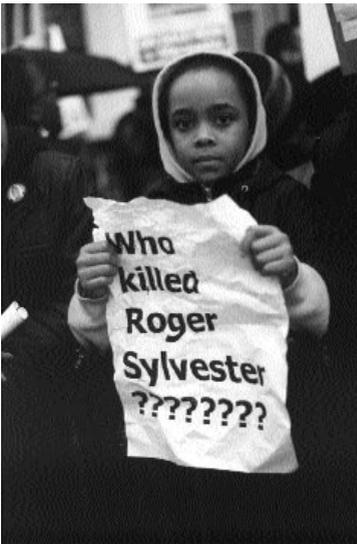


Screening Injustice

Race, violence and media flows

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In his essay "Repetitive Beatings or Criminal Justice?" John Hutnyk writes about "Dog-Tribe", a music video released in 1994 by the radical British Asian music group FunDaMental which, according to him was "banned" – a term he uses to describe the lack of visibility, (or "silencing" as he later refers to it), of the video on MTV and ITV, the major television music video distribution outlets in Britain. As Hutnyk puts it, "the 'banning' seems to have been less a government decree than self-censorship in anticipation of such a decree". In order to explain this self-censorship on the part of the Television channels, he turns to the Criminal Justice Act according to which "publishing material intended or likely to stir up racial hatred" or showing videos which "present an inappropriate model for children" qualifies as grounds for censorship or arrest. It is left uncertain whether or not any of the channels involved ever actually invoked or referred to this Act in order to explain their

stand on the video, or if this is a connection that Hutnyk himself is making. What is clear is that in the case of "Dog-Tribe", the music video he describes in this essay, Hutnyk is talking about a flow, or the (lack of) circulation of a particular set of sounds and images.

For the purpose of this argument, let us look more closely at the concept of a 'flow'. According to Manuel Castells, "society is constructed around flows: flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organisational interaction, flows of images, sounds and symbols. Flows are not just one element of the social organisation: they are the expression of processes *dominating* our economic, political, and symbolic life" (author's emphasis). Castells is introducing a new concept (the space of flows) but he props it up on a very old crutch – "Dominant social practices are those which are embedded in dominant social structures. By dominant structures I understand those arrangements of organisations and institutions whose internal logic plays a strategic role in shaping social practices and social consciousness for society at large".¹

Is there a relation between Hutnyk and Castells, particularly on the subject of flows of images, sounds and symbols? Castells correctly places such media flows with other simultaneous currents, as does Hutnyk, with the particular flow he describes. However, both seek to map the terrain of the social within a strong logic of domination. In the case of Hutnyk, following on from a Cultural Studies tradition of 'celebrating the marginal', he frames "Dog-Tribe" as 'resistance', an unfortunate metaphor permanently hypostatizing its object under the shadow of its converse, the mainstream dominant. While not wanting to wholly invalidate such a framework (indeed, politically 'domination' is a crucially important concept), I want to add an element of contingency to media flows by pointing to the disruption of a flow as another kind of flow, one which need not necessarily be placed within a dominating/dominated relation. Thereby, I also hope to disrupt the singular logic of 'ban'=silence=state/legality=domination/resistance, which Hutnyk's and a lot of other Cultural Studies writing sets up, particularly in discussions of 'race'. Disturbing the comfortable linearity of this logic is important inasmuch as descriptions of media flows, especially narratives of disruption, have invariably been framed in these terms. Finally, I also point to how alternative mappings of media flows might be crucial to understanding discussions of race and urban violence, particularly in the context of contemporary Britain.

I start with a description of the unusual circumstances around *Injustice*, a recent film first screened on 5 April 2001 at the Ritzy Cinema (Brixton, London) as the closing night film of the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival.

Injustice is: "the radical new film which documents the struggles for justice by the families of Black people that have been killed by the police. Police officers are trying to suppress the film by threatening legal action against cinemas. The filmmakers and families are resisting these attacks" (excerpt from a leaflet distributed by the United Families and Friends Campaign at a picket held outside the office of Russell Jones & Walker, solicitors for the Police Federation).²

Ken Fero, the co-director of the film, shot it over a period of seven years. In August 2001, I interviewed Ken Fero and Brenda Weinberg (chairperson of the United Families and Friends Campaign), also one of the main people in the film.

Following the Human Rights Watch festival, the next UK screening of *Injustice* was on

6 July 2001 at the Metro Cinema in Central London. This screening was scheduled for 6:30 in the evening. The same morning there was a short preview of the film on BBC London Live Radio covered by Helen Bart, the Community Affairs correspondent. At 5:15 on the evening of the screening, a strongly worded fax arrived in the office of the Metro addressed to Eva Tarr Kirkhope, the owner and Manager of the Metro cinema hall from the office of Russell Jones & Walker, solicitors for the Police Federation, threatening libel action against the cinema owner and her company if the screening went ahead. The screening was canceled.

Offices at Conway Hall (11th July, London), The Cornerhouse Cinema (17th July, Manchester) and The Lux (2nd August, London) each received a version of this fax about an hour before scheduled screenings and decided not to go ahead with the film. After the second time, the filmmakers and the UFFC started expecting cancellation and started arranging alternative venues. I finally saw the film at one of these alternative 'guerrilla' screenings on 16 August 2001 in London. People wanting to watch the film (having previously e-mailed Migrant Media, Ken Fero's production company) were invited to the Turnpike Lane underground station at a given time, where a representative from Migrant Media then took them to an undisclosed venue. The atmosphere at these screenings was electric. The screening of the film I attended was followed by a session where several UFFC members and people who had been in the film addressed the audience, thanked them for coming, handed out leaflets and announced various forthcoming demonstrations.

The aim of the fax and the consistency of its arrival at every cinema hall was, I think, singular – to prevent the film from being seen and to keep it out of the public domain. However, as it seems from the circumstances, this move on the part of the police federation backfired. During the months of July-August 2001, I tried to keep track of the media coverage of *Injustice*. I had a very hard time. The logic for the fax was 'common sense' media theory – there is a film, there are audiences. Stop the audiences from watching the film and it will disappear. What was not taken into account was 'inter-media' commentary (newspapers, radio, television, word of mouth) and even more intangible things such as gossip, rumour and sensation.

As Brenda put it to me in our conversation, "the police federation have shot themselves in the foot". Nearly every day there was some kind of report – in various newspapers, on the radio, the Internet, even in one instance on BBC's *Newsnight*, an extremely



'mainstream' television news programme. Usually framed as confrontations of 'good vs. evil', every article or report I could find was strongly in favour of *Injustice*, the UFFC and Migrant Media. The police federation was severely criticised and lines from the fax such as "Mr. Brian Douglas died of accidental baton injuries" were quoted (this line in particular was quoted on the BBC television programme) and ridiculed. A spate of press coverage followed the Conway Hall screening (11 July 2001), where after another fax, dramatically, the audience (including members of the UFFC) occupied the lights room, took over the premises and forced a screening for all 98 minutes of the film despite the Conway Hall management opening the skylight (making the screen difficult to see) and calling the police. Three separate reports appeared, exclusively on this incident on BBC Online. Other reports appeared in *The Guardian* and *The Evening Standard*.

Another interesting question arose in my discussion with Brenda Weinberg. The reasons publicly cited by the police federation for their threat of libel action against the cinema halls was that serving police officers were 'named' in the film, thereby making it defamatory. Brenda pointed out that in numerous newspaper reports during the course of the trials, these same officers had already been 'named' several times. Thus, such a strong reaction to the documentary was clearly inexplicable on these grounds. Thinking about it later, I figured out a possible answer to this problem. I realised that it wasn't just the fact that the police officers were being 'named'. That is only part of what they were objecting to. By their own admission, at the time of the Metro screening (and I now quote from the text of the fax) – "neither of our clients nor ourselves have seen this film". The fax goes on to mention the publicity – "very considerable publicity has been given both to the film and your screening". From the publicity they gather that the film tells the story of Brian Douglas and Ibrahim Sey among others. Further in the fax, they state that their client was "the custody officer at the time of that incident". From here they declare, "you will appreciate that the *portrayal* of Mr. Sey's death as murder will necessarily accuse our client Mr. Highton of being his murderer or at the very least [of] complicity in that murder" (emphasis mine).³



In my opinion, it is this 'portrayal' they fear – they are afraid not only of the fact of being 'named' but, more importantly, of the narrative of the film. What spurs them to action is the culmination and augmentation of the publicity with a particular type of media representation – one which deploys the affective dimensions of images and sounds to relay a narrative of injustice and victimhood. Based presumably on their assumptions of how documentary films work and assuming a certain notion of an 'audience' (in this case the 'Hypodermic Needle' media theory of audiences as gullible and passive consumers), they are frightened of the film, the story it will tell and how they think people will be effected by it. They presume that the narrative of the film will indict them more strongly than any number of strongly worded newspaper editorials can. Only that can explain the way in which the film was conscientiously followed and blocked at every public screening.

Thinking of these series of events as a 'flow', it is possible to argue here that a particular attempt at disruption instead caused an intense proliferation. This perspective further became clear in my conversation with Helen Bart, who was covering *Injustice* for the *Community Affairs* section of BBC London Live and had done a preview of the film, the morning of the Metro Screening. As per her account it was the attempt to stop the screenings of the film that made it a 'news-story' simply beyond a preview, both for her and for the other media which she commented on. Now this need not be taken in a negative sense.

Twice in our conversation Helen identified herself as part of the 'Black' press. Her remit at BBC London Live Radio is to cover matters related to African-Caribbean communities in London. She had genuine sympathy for the UFFC and as she described it, her commitment to bring what was happening with *Injustice* to the attention of her listeners had led her to each and every screening/demonstration/public event connected with the film and the UFFC. By the time I first met her at the picket outside the office of Russell Jones & Walker on 23 August 2001, she personally knew Ken, Brenda and several other people involved in the campaign.

To return to the problem I began with – it is important to think through the ways in which such a media flow can be framed as a description. It is further important to clarify this point in relation to our conception of a 'flow'. I do not want to suggest that there is never such a thing as 'domination'. Instead, what I want to point to is that mapping flows purely in these terms leads to two major problems. Firstly, it ignores a certain fragility inscribed into what can be better described as moments of domination, in what are more often than not, relations of representation. Secondly, the narrative of domination/resistance overwhelmingly privileges structure, leaving very little agency with the social actors it frames as 'marginal'. In my discussion with Brenda, I shared most of the ideas I had for my essay at that point in time, one of which was the relationship between the UFF Campaign and the media. I quote an excerpt from this part of the discussion:

Self: [...] I was thinking about the relationship between the media and your campaign as well as the film, in terms of creating a space which perhaps didn't exist before, where an issue like police violence can be discussed...

BW: [...] I suppose we are pushing that barrier. Deaths in custody is not a politically correct subject to be aired and yet, because we keep pushing and pushing at this barrier and court-judging the media then it is a topic of conversation that is out there. I mean, for instance,

Channel 4 were offered the film but wouldn't touch it because of its political ramifications, if you like. So they kept away from it. Yet, the news programme, I mean for a programme like *BBC Newsnight* to have done that interview and have named names, was I thought very radical. I was myself shocked when I saw it! [laughs].

While the news and other simultaneous media flows, as much as any other aspect of the social, do possess their own structures of power and institutional organisation, this does not necessarily preclude them from what Ernesto Laclau has called the "instability of the social" – these are equally spaces of conflicting articulatory practices where social struggles are constituted and not merely expressed as Castells would have it. Politically, these cannot be mapped on to a simple domination-resistance binary as most Cultural Studies writing would have it. Further, we must keep in mind Max Weber's fundamental point about the State's monopoly on legitimate violence within a specific territory. We can then see how the efforts of Ken, Brenda and others on the campaign, (as also the misfired efforts of the Police Federation to disrupt the flow of Injustice), contributes to the ways in which definitions of the state and civil society are circulated, inasmuch as it takes issue with the boundaries of what constitutes 'legitimate' violence. It puts this legitimacy within quotes, as it were, by placing an issue such as police violence as a "topic of conversation that is out there" (Brenda's words). These are often amorphous and extremely complex flows, which it is not always possible to track.

Let me move from here to the final part of my argument. Why have these media-tized flows become particularly important in the context of contemporary Britain? In order to answer this question, let us turn to the Macpherson Report released in February 1999, based on the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence, a Black British teenager. This is the first government report to acknowledge and indicate the widespread incidence of institutional racism in Britain, particularly in the police force. Following this report, a new definition of a racial incident has come into place, whereby a racial incident is that which is "perceived to be so by its victim or by any other witness". While this definition was envisaged as bringing a change in the way that the police are obliged to investigate racial violence, the stress on interpretation and perception makes the description of the act of violence a much more contentious issue.

Keeping this in mind, let us move to Laclau's point about representation – "no pure relation of representation is obtainable because it is of the essence of the process of representation that the representative has to contribute to the identity of what is represented". Importantly, this points us both towards the process of representation and the process of representation. Representation is achieved through a process, or a series of contingent articulations, the result of which is never quite finalised, since to an extent it is always in process, depending on the context within which it is articulated. As regards acts of violence, the legislation following the Macpherson Report creates an institutional space recognising that openness, whereby the concrete content through which the particular act of violence is discursively constituted depends heavily on the descriptions generated around that event. It is for this reason, in my opinion, that media flows relating to acts of violence have become extremely important in contemporary Britain, since these flows are centrally constitutive of the conditions of visibility within which an incident will be framed and

seen. Importantly, the ways in which institutional and public practices attempt to frame and reframe a conflict-in-progress is always fraught with an element of contingency. In the course of this argument I have attempted a description of one such struggle. It is in understanding such conflicts and perhaps providing new frames within which these can be understood that academic practice can make a critical contribution.

I would like to thank Ravi Vasudevan and Awadhendra Sharan for their valuable suggestions for this essay.

NOTES

1. Manuel Castells, "The Space of Flows" in *The Castells Reader on Cities and Social Theory*, Ida Susser ed. (New York: Blackwell, 2002).
2. The UFFC is a coalition formed in 1997, which according to the same leaflet is "run by families and friends of those who have died in custody and include the campaigns for: Brian Douglas, Joy Gardner, Shiji Lapite, Ibrahima Sey etc.".
3. My sincere thanks to Ken Fero for providing me with a copy of the fax.

